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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES AS LEARNERS: A STORY OF STRUGGLE

BY

KAREN TEELING

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
OF MASTER OF EDUCATION

IN
ADULT AND HIGHER EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF ADULT, CAREER AND TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION

EDMONTON, ALBERTA
FALL, 1990

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES AS LEARNERS: A STORY OF STRUGGLE submitted by Karen Teeling in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education in Adult and Higher Education.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to reveal women's learning experiences and the meaning these experiences hold for them. The study is an analysis of in-depth interviews with six women as participants in an academic upgrading program.

The women's experiences were grouped into five categories: their past experiences, problems encountered, support received, joys of learning, and fear of the future. Within these groups, subcategories emerged. Past experiences revealed that the women felt they were "nobodies" and that their lives were going nowhere; yet, they desired to be "somebodies" and believed that with the help of education they could succeed. Upon entering the program, they encountered many problems. Some women felt insecure in the academic setting, experiencing doubt concerning their ambitions and difficulty with the self-directed learning method and competitive situations. Other learners felt guilty placing their own interests above the interests of those for whom they cared. Still others felt oppressed by the authority inherent in the instructors' positions. However, their own determination, the instructors' and peers' encouragement, and the responsibilities they were given, all helped to offset these problems. Also, the women gained more control over

their lives as they became more confident in their abilities, less defensive, and more tolerant of others, as a result of their learning experiences. Yet, as the learners neared the end of the upgrading program and prepared to enter a career program, these positive gains were not sufficient to eliminate persistent fears and doubts concerning their abilities and ambitions .

Redefinition of self, definitions of knowing, and approaches to learning were three factors which influenced each woman's reactions to, and perceptions of, her learning experiences. Self-concepts were redefined as learners engaged in new experiences. Participants' reactions to these new self-identities in turn influenced their reactions to the learning process. The way in which the respondents defined knowledge and the means of acquiring that knowledge, and the way in which they approached educational activities varied among the respondents and influenced their learning experiences. These various definitions and approaches affected the extent to which respondents felt in control of their academic learning.

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CHAPTER I

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Introduction

In the past twenty years, the number of women learners attending educational activities has grown significantly. By 1983, women comprised 56% of the adult learning population (Devereaux, 1985). They come to the institutions from various educational and socioeconomic backgrounds, enrolling in activities ranging from academic courses to hobby classes (Devereaux, 1985). Within this disparate group of learners, there is a small number of women who are returning to school to meet basic education requirements. Every year these undereducated women enter academic upgrading or adult basic education (ABE) programs to increase their academic qualifications. Education is perceived, both by the women and society, as a means of improving personal circumstances.

The upgrading programs that these undereducated women attend are part of the larger field of adult education, which is rich with research on the nature of adult learning. Within this research, relevant findings on the psychological and socioeconomic characteristics and motivational factors of adults learners have, if not shaped, at least influenced the philosophy, goals, curriculum, and instruction of upgrading programs.

Perhaps the one thrust in the research most influential in shaping adult education programs is the theory that adults are self-directed learners (Brookfield, 1985). Knowles (1970), the concept's strongest proponent, suggests adults have accumulated a variety of past experiences based on their occupational and social roles. These experiences enable adult learners to be self-directed and independent; therefore, they are capable of participating in the design, implementation, and evaluation of their own learning.

However, according to some theorists, adulthood does not automatically mean self-directedness and independence. For instance, Cross (1981) conceptualizes the personal characteristics of adult learners on three continua: physiological/aging, sociocultural/life phases, and psychological/developmental stages. These continua represent the gradual maturing of children into adults. Level of self-direction, Cross claims, is determined by the point where each adult is on the continua. Thus, this explains the low level of self-direction in some adults and the high level of independence in some children.

Physiological development, sociocultural factors and psychological stages influence adults' experiences. In turn, these experiences define self-concept, determine motivation, and thus control learners' attitudes and behaviors toward educational activities (Knowles, 1970).

Clearly, then, knowledge of undereducated women's past experiences is of particular importance in planning and implementing upgrading programs.

Undereducated women are part of a larger group of undereducated adults. This group is generally young to middle-aged, poor, unskilled or semiskilled with self-concepts much lower than the general population (Clark, Smith, & Harvey, 1982; Mezirow, Darkenwald, & Knox, 1975). The lack of occupational skills may confine this group to jobs characterized by little security and chance for advancement, low pay and status, lack of responsibility, and monotony.

Values and beliefs of this group may differ significantly from those held by the dominant middle class. Harmen and Hunter (1979), who have categorized the sociopsychological characteristics of disadvantaged adults, indicate that their educational success may be determined by the degree to which their values are similar to those of the dominant culture. According to these authors, some undereducated adults feel completely accepted by and accepting of the society in which they participate. Their past experiences as learners or workers have been positive. These learners have set goals; consequently, they are frequently highly motivated and have the potential to become independent learners. In contrast, Harmen and Hunter suggest there are other learners who do not hold the same values as the dominant culture and its educational institutions. Previous educational experiences have been negative; goals are poorly defined or nonexistent; self-concepts and self-esteem are low; and finally, their decision making and critical thinking skills are poorly developed. They often feel they have little or no control over their lives. Adults from this category who are more accustomed to being controlled than in control may find learning activities that emphasize learner responsibility and learner initiative difficult (Rogers, 1971).

Undereducated women are also part of the disparate group of women learners. The findings of the research regarding the reentry of mature women into the educational milieu reveal that they have particular learning experiences based on societal roles and gender-linked psychological factors.

Many women experience anxiety about returning to school and lack confidence in their ability to learn (Cross, 1981; Eliason, 1981; Scott, 1980). Many of these negative feelings stem from the women's perceptions of the difference between their abilities and skills as housewives or unskilled workers, and the abilities required in an intellectual setting (Scott, 1980).

In addition, women who have children often experience conflict between their roles as mothers and students. Juggling responsibilities, such as child care, illnesses, and time spent with children and family, with academic responsibilities presents major problems for women (Patterson & Blank, 1985; Scott, 1980). Gilbert, Manning, and Ponder (1980) discovered that women experience different role conflicts than males and that that difference tends to be influenced by stereotypic female-male roles. Women, according to Gilbert, feel greater conflict than males in terms of familial demands, beliefs about self, and beliefs about role demands. As a result of these conflicts, women as learners experience greater emotional stress.

North American society touts education as being the key to economic and social security. Consequently, adult learners come to educational programs hoping for a better future, regardless of their socioeconomic status or gender. However, adults are not motivated solely by a desire to enhance their economic circumstances. Research findings indicate reasons for participation "are multiple, interrelated, closely connected to life roles, and highly personal" (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982). The desire for self-improvement and personal growth are also motives (Long, 1982; Mezirow, Darkenwald, & Knox, 1975). Moreover, women frequently make their decision to return to school based on the perceived needs of those people for whom they are responsible. Their motivation is determined by others' needs, not their own (Mohney & Anderson, 1988).

Alternately, life transitions, such as loss of job, divorce, injuries, or death of spouse may precipitate participation in learning situations (Cross, 1981).

In the main, the research on adult learning shows the experiences of adult learners to be complex and diverse. Since learners are the central focus of any educational activity, knowledge of the experiences affecting their behaviors and attitudes within this setting is important to the planning and implementing of effective programs. However, educators can fully understand learners' behavior only through knowledge of how learners describe themselves and their world (Kidd, 1973).

Little is known about the learning world as it is seen from undereducated women's points of view. Moreover, the meanings and feelings these women ascribe to their daily lives as students remain unexplored. This is the focus of the present study. A fuller understanding of their actions, attitudes, and beliefs is necessary if upgrading programs are to be effective for undereducated women.

Statement of the Problem

In this study, I propose to reveal some tentative answers to the question: What are the lived experiences of women as participants in an academic upgrading program and what meaning do these experiences hold for them?

As I attempted to explore the lived world of these participants, I used the following questions to guide me in my journey:

1. How has involvement in the program affected women's self-esteem and self-concept?
2. What are women's reactions to the learning process?
3. What impact has involvement in the program had on women's relationships with others?

Definitions

Undereducated women learners

Undereducated women learners are women who have less than the equivalent of grade twelve education, who are seventeen years of age or older, and who are involved in an upgrading program.

Academic Upgrading Programs

Academic Upgrading Programs offer courses to adults who are seeking the equivalent of a high school diploma in grades ten, eleven, or twelve.

The academic upgrading program that the respondents of this study attended is one of many programs offered by a local community college. The philosophy and goals which guide and direct the policies, regulations, curriculum, and instruction of the program were formulated through the joint efforts of the program's instructors and administrators. The philosophy is as follows:

> Academic Upgrading at ***** College is committed to serving the community through a program promoting lifelong learning while respecting the individuality and integrity of the adult learner. (Academic Upgrading Handbook, 1990, p. 2)

The goal is:

> To offer a learning environment providing opportunities for the adult learner to become a more effective member of the community.
>
> To further this goal, Academic Upgrading will develop: enhanced self-esteem, personal and interpersonal skills, an ideal of lifelong learning, knowledge and academic skills, and strategies necessary to succeed in further education and career. (Academic Upgrading Handbook, 1990, p. 2)

Adults may obtain financial support from the Canadian Employment and Insurance Commission (CEIC), Alberta Career Centre through the Alberta Vocational Training (AVT) program, or the Non-Status Indian and Metis (NSIM) organization. Learners also have the option of being fee payers on a full or part-time basis. In addition, student loans and an emergency relief fund are available to all learners.

The program offers adult basic education courses at levels five to ten and high school equivalency courses at levels eleven and twelve. Objectives and course content are designed by the instructors. The content is intended to reflect the experiences and characteristics of the adult learner. Curricula emphasize job readiness skills and preparation for further education.

The program is very individualized in nature. Though there are set curricula, flexibility is valued, offering the learner choices in topics, learning and evaluation methods, resources, and variable completion times. At all levels in the program, learning consists of working independently through a series of modules. Instructors act as facilitators, assisting learners when problems arise and arranging seminars and group discussions, guest speakers, student talks, and occasional trips. There is little or no lecturing.

Evaluation criteria relate directly to the detailed objectives stated in the course outline. Various forms of evaluation are offered: tests, essays, or other assignments jointly decided on by the instructor and learner. All assignments, tests, or essays are graded on a 0 to 4 point system. Learners are given the opportunity to repeat objectives and assignments until a satisfactory standard is obtained.

The program is guided by a set philosophy and predetermined goals and curricula. However, individual instructor's strengths, weaknesses, and personal convictions combined with individual learner's needs and desires determine the strengths and weaknesses of the program as a whole. Consequently, as these dynamics change from year to year so do the strengths and weaknesses of the program.

Significance of the Study

I hope that in revealing the essence of women's experiences as participants in an upgrading program, I may provide to those involved in such programs a deeper understanding of what it is like to be a woman learner.

In a practical way, the perceptions revealed herein may help other women learners to reflect on their own experiences with greater understanding. Hence, this enriched knowledge might enable these learners to proceed through their own learning activities more confidently and more easily.

In addition, educators and program planners should be able to facilitate women learners' education more effectively if they are armed with knowledge of learners' beliefs, attitudes, and values concerning their experiences. Counsellors may also find the results helpful when advising women of career choices and counselling them in personal matters. Furthermore, the study might be of interest to administrators of such programs. They have little direct contact with the learners, and therefore, the understanding gained from the research may help administrators to realize the conditions under which women live and study. In sum, learning activities, policies, and regulations more sensitive to women's experiences may emerge as a result of the heightened awareness gained from this study.

CHAPTER II

METHOD AND DESIGN

According to Husband and Foster (1987), the underlying assumptions of qualitative research are:

> (a) a foundational assumption of the interpretative, creative, and subjective nature of personal and social reality; (b) a commitment to the discovery and uncovering of the various layers of meaning in any personal or social event; and (c) a concern with understanding human action from the actor's own frame of reference. (p. 52)

These assumptions were applicable to the phenomena under study; therefore, methodology and strategies for collecting and analyzing data were chosen from the qualitative paradigm.

Participants

Six women participants of an upgrading program were selected by purposive sampling to be the respondents for this study. Merriam (1988) suggests "purposive sampling is based on the assumption that one wants to discover, understand, gain insight; therefore one needs to select a sample from which one can learn the most" (p. 48). With this in mind, I approached women who exhibited a willingness and an ability to articulate their feelings, opinions, and values.

When I requested the women's participation, I gave a verbal description of the project and a letter delineating the conditions of their involvement. At least two days passed before I approached them again for their decisions. All were willing and eager to participate.

The six women, who were from thirty to fifty years of age, represented a variety of personal situations. One participant was unmarried and childless, another was married with three children, and the other four women were single parents with at least two children each. Their levels of previous education ranged from grade six to a partial grade eleven. In addition, one respondent had been trained in an nontraditional occupation. All the participants were sponsored by government agencies and, before involvement in the program, three of the women had been on social assistance.

At the time of the interviews, two women had just graduated with grade twelve certificates and had been in the program one and three years respectively. Three others, who were in their third year of attendance, were in the last semester of the twelve level, and one woman returned for a second year to begin grade eleven.

Data Collection

My intention was to discover how respondents described the world of learning. Interviewing, more specifically semistructured interviewing, seemed the best method of evoking these descriptions. Semistructured interviews permitted me to ask broad, predetermined questions to ensure similar areas were discussed by all respondents, and the flexibility to ask probing questions, pursuant to individual responses.

At the beginning of each interview, I reiterated the nature of the study and the conditions of participation. The opportunity to ask questions about, or to withdraw from, the project was offered. Each interview was taped in order "to record as fully and fairly as possible that particular interviewee's perspective" (Patton, 1980, p. 247). After each session, I recorded in a journal my feelings, perceptions, and reactions concerning the research. This process helped me to prepare for subsequent interviews and to analyse the data.

Pilot Study

The success of the interviews depended on my skills as an interviewer. Thus, cognizant of my need to improve these skills, I conducted a pilot study. This experience taught me an important lesson: to remain constantly aware of my role as an interviewer. As I became involved with the respondents' comments, my inclination was to help solve their problems rather than uncover their feelings concerning these problems. I needed to be mindful that data collection depended on interviewing, not counselling.

Furthermore, because the quality and richness of data depended on my skills, I continued to treat each interview as if it were a pilot study. I discovered that outlining at the beginning of each session the main areas to be covered gave interviewees direction, and thus, made them feel more secure. The participants knew in advance where to focus their thoughts; therefore, more insightful responses eventuated.

The Interviews

All interviews followed a similar pattern. The respondents and I knew each other, so little time was needed to put the women at ease. I felt they were quite comfortable with me, as I was with them. Therefore, after a few moments of small talk, I began by briefly outlining the steps in the research process that involved the respondents: interviewing, validation of transcripts, and verification of analysis and interpretation of data. Participants were then asked questions eliciting information about past school, work, and personal experiences that influenced their decision to enroll in an upgrading program. Additional questions guided the women through their experiences as learners. As the women told their stories, I attempted to probe for their feelings and perceptions concerning these experiences. This additional probing varied in type from respondent to respondent, depending on individual responses and on themes and ideas that had emerged in preceding interviews.

After the initial analysis of the interviews, the responses of two women who were particularly forthcoming and articulate revealed many themes and concepts which required further probing. Thus, I conducted second interviews with each of these two women, seeking a deeper understanding of these themes and concepts.

Prior to the second session, I had given the respondents a transcript of their first interview. There were three months between the two interviews for one participant, and two weeks for the other. This time lapse gave the two participants an opportunity to validate their transcripts, but more importantly to reflect on the questions, as well as on their own responses. Reflection enriched their perceptions. Consequently, during the second interview, the respondents were able to provide specific examples and detailed accounts of events, behaviors, attitudes, and feelings initially only described.

I also used these second interviews to "try out ideas and themes" (Bogdan and Biklen, 1980, p. 152). Our discussions helped me to clarify, articulate, reformulate, and even discard rudimentary ideas and concepts that had begun to form in my mind. Even after this session, I continued to meet with the two women, asking for further clarification and elaboration. These follow-up sessions were not taped; conversations were informal but nonetheless useful in bringing meaning and understanding to the respondents' experiences.

The optimal length of the interviews was an hour. Exploration of feelings and attitudes created an intensity that was wearying. I found it difficult to sustain my concentration beyond an hour; I assumed the respondents did also.

At the end of the interviewing process, I felt that the women were glad they had participated. The interviews had given them an opportunity to articulate feelings concerning themselves and their experiences, and this articulation provided insight into how they viewed themselves. One woman commented she was surprised to discover that she perceived herself so negatively. Perhaps reflecting on what they had said about themselves was as helpful to them as it was to me. I hoped so; I took so much of their time.

Analysing the Data

Preliminary analysis started with the first interview. I listened to the first tape while reading the transcript and making note of major topics and ideas that emerged. I repeated this process with each additional transcript, comparing and contrasting the emergent ideas and concepts with those of preceding interviews. This immersion in the data created a familiarity out of which materialized general impressions and insights. Familiarity was useful and necessary in performing the next step, coding data into units. A unit, according to Guba and Lincoln (1985), has two criteria:

> First, it should be heuristic, that is aimed at some understanding or some action that the inquirer needs to have or to take. Unless it is heuristic it is useless, however intrinsically interesting. Second, it must be the smallest piece of information about something that can stand by itself, that is, it must be interpreted in the absence of any additional information other than a broad understanding of the context in which the inquiry is carried out. (p. 345)

Based on this definition, all data were unitized. Even information that seemed irrelevant or off topic revealed respondents' perceptions about themselves or their world. Knowledge of these perceptions helped bring a deeper understanding to other more relevant experiences. Each unit of data was coded and grouped according to its general topic. I had first envisioned these general topics to be similar to the three original research questions, but other more logical groups materialized. Participants' experiences fell naturally into five general categories: past experiences, problems encountered, support received, joys of learning, and fear of the future.

Within these main categories, commonalities appeared. Units with commonalities were grouped into subgroups and given a descriptor which attempted to capture the essence of each cluster. Therefore, I had to go beyond the mere description of the experiences, and pay close attention to respondents' intonation, nonverbal language, and choice of words, for therein lay the meaning of their experiences.

During the analysis, I looked for particular elements or themes that persisted throughout the learners' entire experiences and that provided a key to a greater understanding of these experiences. I gradually learned to live with ambiguity and frustration, as I searched for these themes. Finally, I found it necessary to put the data away, giving myself an opportunity to disengage and rest from a process that was both exhausting and exhilarating.

After a period of rest, I began again by performing an in-depth analysis of the transcripts. I asked questions of each respondent's comments as I analysed. What elements, aspects, dimensions of her being affected her experiences? What were her perceptions of her experiences? Each time a tentative answer appeared, I questioned the data, seeking substantiation of my answers. I moved from one transcript to the next, comparing emergent themes. Through this process of questioning, answering, substantiating, and comparing, themes that held the essence of the women's experiences gradually emerged.

Ethical Considerations

Efforts were taken to ensure that participants were treated respectfully and honestly, and that their data were handled confidentially. The initial conversation and letter informed participants of the nature and purpose of the research, their involvement in the study, and the option of withdrawing at any point during the process. Moreover, confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by changing names, and altering or omitting any detailed information or contextual references that could reveal an identity.

Coping with Bias

Data by itself is meaningless; thus, researchers rely on their "theoretical assumptions and cultural knowledge to make sense out of their data" (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). Hence, research findings are never value-free. Nevertheless, researchers must attempt to minimize the effect of their presuppositions and assumptions. My involvement with the learners and the program as an instructor prior to my role as a researcher raised some concern for me. Would my role as instructor affect their responses? Would my perceptions as an instructor bias the data?

On the other hand, I knew my experiences as an instructor would benefit the research. Tesch (1987) suggests "phenomenological researchers, if they are sensible, don't choose topics for investigation about which they know nothing, and in which they are not much interested" (p. 6). I knew her comments were applicable to my study even though it was not rooted in phenomenology. My knowledge of, and interest in, women's experiences in an upgrading program benefited the research process in three ways: better selection of respondents, more focussed interviews, and enhanced insights through intuitive knowledge. First, previous knowledge of, and relationships with, the learners enabled me to select respondents whom I knew were forthcoming and articulate, and with whom I had already developed trust and rapport. Secondly, familiarity with the learning situation allowed conversations in the interviews to be focussed directly on heuristic concerns. For example, if respondents spoke of the inaccessibility of books, I knew the situation first hand. Time was spent not on describing the situation, but on discovering the feelings and attitudes that arose from this problem. Finally, my familiarity with the learners' lives gave me a sense of knowing regarding their experiences. This intuitive knowledge enhanced insights which helped to penetrate experiences in search of underlying meanings (Tesch, 1987).

Nevertheless, I took precautions to ensure that my role as an instructor had minimal effect on respondents and the data. In selecting participants, I chose women with whom I would not be working when I returned from my sabbatical leave. These participants, I felt, would not need to worry how their comments affected our relationship as instructor and learner. Also, I recorded reflections on my insights, feelings, and speculations during data collection and analysis. Through this critical reflection, I was able to distinguish my reactions as an researcher from those as a instructor. Techniques employed to validate the trustworthiness of the data also checked for biases.

In the end, I was satisfied that with the aid of discreet selection of respondents, critical reflection, and validation techniques, I had transcended any biases I may have had as an instructor.

Data Trustworthiness

Three techniques were used to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings: member check, triangulation, and peer consultation.

Member Check

Internal validation, which means matching the findings with reality (Merriam, 1988), was checked by asking each respondent to assess the accuracy of her transcripts and the plausibility of analysis and interpretation of data. The final analysis incorporated the suggestions and corrections forwarded by the respondents during the member check.

Triangulation

Owens (1982) describes triangulation as a process whereby a number of sources are used to check the accuracy of data analysis, guaranteeing reliability as well as internal validation. I cross-checked interpretation of data by asking six women other than those interviewed to verify the extent to which the emerging categories and themes reflected their experiences. They confirmed the veracity of the findings and also commented on their own experiences. The impressions and awareness I gained from their comments gave me further insight into undereducated women's experiences as learners.

Peer Consultation

Instructors in the program also validated my findings, perceptions, and insights. In addition, I discussed with them any doubts, frustrations, or anxieties experienced during the research process. This activity gave me an opportunity to vent any emotions that may have otherwise interfered with the research process (Owens, 1982).

Assumptions

I assumed that the respondents truthfully and openly related their experiences, and that all experiences related were valued by, and relevant to, the women as learners.

Delimitations and Limitations

The study was delimited to six women learners who had been in the program for at least one year.

Moreover, the study did not attempt to find reasons for, or causes of, their experiences; to predict the success of participants beyond the program according to their experiences; nor to compare the differences in experiences based on where the women were in the program.

The study was limited by the respondents' abilities to recall and articulate their perceptions, feelings, and experiences. The richness of the data was also limited by my ability as a interviewer.

CHAPTER III

THE WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES

Forward

Once the data were coded, they fell into five logical categories: past experiences, problems encountered, support received, joys of learning, and fears of the future. Within these categories, experiences with commonalities were grouped into clusters. Each cluster was given a descriptor, a thematic statement, which attempted to capture the essence of these experiences. These descriptors were usually chosen from key words or phrases used by the respondents themselves.

For more effective communication, each category and the clusters within each category are related separately. This is done with the understanding that an experience does not happen in isolation, but happens because of or in spite of events that occurred before, during, and after the experience. As the women related accounts of their involvement in the program, it became apparent that their individual experiences were tightly connected and interwoven, creating one comprehensive experience.

Here, then, are the experiences of six women learners as they proceed through an upgrading program.

Past Experiences

The women talked openly about their pasts. Detailed descriptions of previous school, work, and personal experiences illuminated these events and incidents, exposing the perceptions they had of themselves. Through their candor, respondents revealed how they viewed the quality of their lives, who they thought they were, and what they wanted to be.

My life was going nowhere.

All the respondents were discontented with the direction in which their lives were going. They claimed that their personal and financial circumstances made their life styles unsatisfactory and unacceptable, and they saw that their lives would go nowhere unless efforts were made to change these circumstances.

Betty, who had a nontraditional trade in the construction industry, had little commitment to her work. She "slid into construction by accident," and continued to do the same job for years because "it was the only thing I knew that would get me any money." However, she had not liked what she had been doing:

> I had difficulty making friends for the simple reason that I was never around a place long enough to make friends...I couldn't form solid friendships or

> relationships of any kind.

The work in the construction industry enabled her to obtain financial security but not the social life she sought. Thus, Betty perceived that her personal life was going nowhere.

Other participants did not have Betty's enviable financial status and, thus, rated the quality of their lives far below an acceptable standard, based on their economic situations. If the respondents worked, low pay and little security characterized their jobs, which mainly comprised house cleaning, cooking, washing dishes, baby-sitting, and other unskilled work. Such work allowed little opportunity for the women to make improvements to their living conditions; consequently, they also felt their lives were stagnating:

> It [my life] was going nowhere. I didn't have any kind of a future...That is a lost feeling, boy, when you think that the most you can earn is $5.00 an hour.

The outlooks of respondents who were unemployed were equally as dismal:

> [My life was going] nowhere...I was on social assistance and I didn't see any way getting off of it.

The paucity of inherent rewards in unskilled labour was no less discouraging than its lack of financial benefits. The work, respondents claimed, was often difficult, monotonous, and socially isolating. Continuation in such employment left the women with the prospect of a life of drudgery. At least Sandra had reason to think so when she reflected on her job as a cook:

> I didn't find it rewarding. But then I worked for CN, and the men I worked for, they had no appreciation. You could cook a very good meal and know it was a really good meal. You wouldn't get so much as a thanks.....In fact I think it made me feel worthless because their attitudes towards cooks was, if you stay on at CN for a long time, most cooks become alcoholics. It didn't give you very much of a positive outlook on life. You know, if I stay here I am going to become a drunk.

Anne was more graphic in her account of job dissatisfaction:

> I have been a dishwasher, a chambermaid, a housekeeper....It is nothing but the same old routine....when you start washing human stuff off of

> the walls, windows and curtains, it's not all that pleasant.

She also spoke of the social isolation she experienced in her jobs:

> Most of it was by yourself.....you really don't have much time to communicate because you have to get your work done.

Moreover, lack of finances and confidence limited respondents' opportunities to develop satisfactory relationships within their communities. Consequently many of the them felt socially isolated and alienated. As a result, the women who had children depended mainly on them for companionship and personal fulfillment:

> My life [was] really tied up in my kids and that is why because I didn't have any place else to go.

> We [the kids and I] did everything together because I relied so much on my kids to keep me occupied.

Implicit in these comments is the wish that these relationships were otherwise. Respondents did not want to be totally dependent on their children. One respondent realized that women whose lives are occupied solely by their dependents face a bleak and dim future, for children inevitably leave:

> It [my life] was sort of going to be empty. When I was wrapped up in my kids, there was lots there. But you know, kids grow up and they leave home, and there was going to be this hollow spot. And I didn't know what I was going to do with my life after that.

For the most part, the participants perceived that their lives held little promise. They had little hope of a brighter future as long as their lives remained the same. Anne echoed the desperation and hopelessness felt by the other participants as she succinctly and graphically depicted her future prospects:

> It was like I should take a shovel and shovel myself into a tunnel and stay there.

I was a nobody.

The respondents were aware that in our society one's identity and worth is almost exclusively defined by the work one does. They were also aware of the societally constructed hierarchy which attributes more value to some jobs, and to those who perform them, than to others.

"Money and education," determined one respondent, are two factors placing one job and those fulfilling it above another. Since their jobs offered little money and required no formal education, these women placed themselves low on the hierarchy, defining themselves as "nobodies." Linda, who cleaned houses, shared what she assumed to be society's evaluation of that job and of those who do it:

> This sounds horrible, but I think they [society] think of you [a house cleaner] as some dumb immigrant type of a person. You're not much good for anything else. Even the guy who picks up garbage, which nowadays is a little bit higher class than cleaning houses, has to have a driver's license.

Similarly, Nancy, a housewife, viewed herself as a nobody with no right to have personal opinions or desires:

> ...I used to feel that if you are just at home that you are in a different class. The ones that work and have an education are better than you are, so you do what they want.

Based on their contributions to society, many respondents perceived themselves to be unimportant and worthless. Linda believed nobody would use her ideas "because I don't have anything to say really. I have lots to say, but I mean what do I have to talk about - my kids and living on welfare. That's all." And Helen assumed she was perceived as a loser by society: "someone who doesn't know how to dress properly; somebody who doesn't know how to talk to people; somebody who is just there." So for her, washing dishes and cooking in a kitchen provided a haven: "...you didn't associate with anyone. You felt good about being back there because nobody could get to know you. You didn't matter to anybody, so you were in a safe area."

The women felt they received little respect from society; as a consequence, they had little ambition or respect for themselves. "I didn't have any goals because I didn't think I was worthy of having any goals," explained Linda. "My attitude was that I was a nobody, just someone that was there," responded another participant.

Betty also viewed herself as a nobody. However, her evaluation was based more on her perceived failures than on society's assessment of her contributions. As a rebellious teenager, she had quit school in grade eleven and had become a trained labourer, two decisions she regretted and which influenced her self-evaluation. "I wasn't confident, and I didn't feel very good about myself. I didn't like myself," she said.

I want to be a somebody.

As nobodies, the women felt unfulfilled and purposeless. They wanted to be respected and recognized as contributing adults, to be part of the "inside crowd." They did not want to feel "just like a number." Isolation and alienation induced a longing to be "back in the world, back in the community with people," conversing on a variety of subjects. Conversations that focussed on " 'What did you do today?' 'I changed five diapers, and I washed dishes,' " became "kind of stale." They wanted more.

> I didn't want to just sit back being an outsider looking inside. I wanted to be part of the inside crowd.....like being able to communicate, or just going and playing ball, going to a dance. Being able to associate with the people, not just sit, and that's it.

> I didn't want to go back to waiting tables, or cooking hash in some hot restaurant. I didn't want that because I felt I had more to offer, to offer myself. I could advance myself. I didn't have to stay in surroundings that I didn't really feel that I was growing in.

Just as they knew what determined a "nobody," they knew what defined a "somebody," and they wanted to be one.

> Sophisticated. Very intelligent. Somebody that I would like to be.

A somebody had jobs with status:

> ...it seems like you've got to be out working. Not just working but you got to have a certain type of job. You have to have a little dog at home that goes to a kennel, and you got to have everything. Your kids would have to be perfect, get A's in school.

> ....not just a teller in a bank, but you got to be in a more important position in a bank, like a manager; in the store, not just a clerk, but you've got to be back in the office.

Occasionally, some respondents found short-term work that was gratifying. During the summer months, Anne, who was one such respondent, was employed as a day-care worker. She proudly related her experiences:

> ...that was the only job I have had in my life that I felt was rewarding. The kids would stand at the window in the morning. When I came, if I didn't wave at them,

> they would say, "You didn't wave at me this morning." Another thing, when you walk in the door, you have mega kids grabbing hold of you because they are happy that you are there.

Anne was over forty-five years old. She had quit school at fifteen to go to work, in accordance with her father's wishes. "You don't make a living in school," was her father's philosophy. Thirty years later, she finally found an enjoyable job. Her brief experience as a day-care worker kindled her hopes and dreams of escaping the tedium of her previous working life, and provided her with an educational goal. Her plan was to become a trained day-care worker.

I can be a somebody.

Education offered respondents an opportunity to change and to "make something" of their lives. It was the pathway to a life style with respectable social and financial status, the respondents argued.

> It [returning to school] meant that I would be allowed to grow again. I was opening up doors to growth. And I was going to make something of my life.

For Anne, "book knowledge" meant credentials, which in turn meant freedom from dead-end jobs.

> Sure working out you have the practical experience, but you don't have the book knowledge. In this day and age that is very important....There are lots more fields out there, where if you got no education, you're like the labourer with a pick and a shovel.

Likewise, Linda foresaw a brighter future with a nurse's aide certificate:

> I find out there are three jobs available just on my first year certificate for thirty thousand a year....All my advantages of being a nurse's aide rather than just somebody walking off the street.

All the respondents agreed that they, and only they, were able to effect change. To be somebody meant "applying yourself to the best of your ability." Sandra explained how the onus to improve oneself lay with the individual:

> I have always been interested in the arts....That is where I should apply myself. It is something within yourself; it is your own self-esteem. Have I applied myself to the best of my ability, or have I gone through life being only half of what I can be? It

> [education] opened a lot of doors for me that I had closed off before. It was me that had closed those doors.

Thus, some respondents were critical of others, particularly other women, who were not willing to apply themselves to the "best of their ability."

> I don't like women who go around feeling sorry for themselves and don't do anything to get out of it. I don't mind them feeling sorry for themselves because we all do that, but I don't like them if they don't do anything to get out of it.

> A lot of people, people I love dearly, blame so many other things on their situation in life. I think that 90% of the time it is because you are not doing anything to change it.

These women were willing to change their "situations in life," and had been willing to for some time. They voiced a continuing desire for education even when personal circumstances prevented them from returning to school. For example, one respondent who was a mother suppressed her desire to finish her schooling until responsibilities to her children had lessened:

> ..I always had a dream that I would do something besides raising children. When they got older, I always dreamed I would do something else.

For two single mothers, it was not the nurturing of their children that caused them to defer enrollment. Their reasons for deferment were financial:

> I always did want to go to school. I am a single parent....I tried to get into school. Nobody would sponsor me. I went to the welfare; I went to a college in Calgary, but nobody would help. That was in the early seventies. I wasn't able to raise my children and go to school, too, so I waited until they were gone. I always told the kids one day it is going to be my time, and here it is.

> I always thought I was going to go back and be a nurse's aide, but nobody told me how I could get into it. I was on welfare and part time work. There was no way I was going to be able to do it with my five kids. Nobody gave me any ideas that the government would help you, so I just dropped it.

Betty, a single woman, did not have the responsibility of a family; however, reentry was still difficult for her. She liked to be self-reliant and, therefore, was reluctant to give up the job that afforded her financial independence:

> I have been talking about going back to school for a long time, but another job would come up which was always a handy excuse.

The opportunity and decision to return to school came about differently for each woman. Nancy pursued academic upgrading after two of her three children had entered school. Anne, a single parent, enrolled in the program once she was no longer financially responsible for her children. The lack of financial assistance forced her to wait until her children had left home. Linda, a single parent with five children, also had been constrained by her economic situation. After her three older children left home, she finally received financial assistance, allowing her to return to school while still supporting two dependents. Sandra's decision was precipitated by both her age and the age of her children:

> I hit thirty and I thought, "Holy Lord, half of my life is over." The age women are supposed to live to is between 65 and 70....Where am I going?...My kids are going to grow up and leave home, and I was going to be

> left. I wasn't going to have anything.

For Helen, it was maturity:

> I was more determined, more grown-up...accepting things for the way they are, not living in a fantasy world. There is a real world out there, and you have to get involved with it....You know, that is what I'd been doing, living in one big fantasy world.

A longing for a richer and more fulfilling life style motivated respondents to return to education, even though memories of past school experiences reminded them that learning may be neither easy nor particularly pleasant. Moreover, they knew responsibilities as adults and mothers would present additional pressures. In spite of these obstacles, they enrolled in an upgrading program determined to change their lives.

Problems Encountered as Learners

As the women proceeded through the program, a variety of problems arose. The kinds of difficulties encountered and their effects depended on each respondent's past experiences and present circumstances. As a whole, these problems were internal, instructional, or interpersonal in nature.

Am I out of my tree?

The respondents entered the program armed with determination but burdened with fears and doubts. Had they hoped for something that was beyond their reach? Did they have the stamina and the perseverance to go through the program? Would they be accepted? Were they too old to learn?

Past experiences defined their perceptions of themselves as learners and their attitudes about the educational process. For the most part, respondents, whose previous school experiences had been negative, doubted their academic abilities:

> ...I did know I would have to go through this nightmare again, just to finish my schooling...it was not that much fun then.

> I didn't think I was the academic type. I barely squeezed by. I didn't feel academically that I was any good.

> I thought I was so stupid, and if I got my grade ten I would be happy....I've been told ever since I was born how stupid I am.

Moreover, "coming to college" evoked images of intellectual activities exceeding their capabilities. Helen was sure that her basic language and computation skills were far below acceptable standards. It was though she feared she was not "up to upgrading:"

> Will I understand their [instructors'] English? Are they going to speak in words I never heard of or don't know the meaning of? Am I going to talk really stupid?...I was afraid that maybe I was starting too low, that people would laugh..."You mean to say you don't know how to do fractions? Oh boy!"

Lack of confidence in her ability led Helen to worry about how she would be treated:

> Am I going to be treated like a little kid in kindergarten? "You do this and that is it." Talked to in a childish way, not adult to adult. I was afraid that would happen because I am on social assistance.

These feelings of academic and intellectual inferiority engendered unrealistic expectations. Two respondents commented:

> I was just going to drive myself; I was going to do

> better; I was going to work harder....I didn't expect help from the teachers, so I just kept to myself, and I worked hard....I wasn't aware that you didn't have to do it just right, that you didn't have to work for 100% all the time.

> My expectations were to be the best...the best student ...I thought that was the way I would be accepted.

The learners and their families felt undue pressure and anxiety as a result of these unrealistic expectations. These same respondents explained:

> I worked day and night and I thought this was how I was going to have to work for the remaining years I went to school....It was really hard because it seemed like I was not going to have any home life left. I was kind of terrified. Did I really want it this bad?

> When I entered the program in grade ten, not only was I expecting too much of myself, but also of my kids. When they came home from school I expected my daughter to get top marks. I expected so much of myself, and I expected the same from her.

Even learners who had healthier self-concepts as a result of positive learning experiences had nagging doubts about their capabilities. For instance, Betty viewed herself as a high achiever and a fast learner, and yet in her mind this was no assurance she would succeed:

> I just hoped that I would do well and that I would get back into the learning process.

Doubts about their ability accompanied fears of social ostracism. Sometimes by choice, other times by circumstance, some of the women had been shut off from the larger community. Enrollment in an educational program meant venturing "back into the world." For some, this was a scary thought:

> I was afraid I wouldn't be liked by anybody. Am I going to be accepted?

> ...I had isolated myself for quite a few years....I didn't socialize too much. Was I going to be accepted by people, by the instructors...?

> I thought people would laugh at me... because I have had problems in my life that they could see that written all over my face....

Respondents' age also engendered doubts and fears. Formal education has been traditionally for the young. Only recently has society advocated and promoted lifelong learning. Current educational trends, however, did not relieve the anxiety felt by the older respondents. They expressed concerns about being too old to learn, looking out of place, and feeling uncomfortable in a setting established mainly for young adults. The fear of being too old was so real for Anne that it motivated her to question her sanity:

> My first day...and I saw all those young kids coming in, I thought that maybe I was out of my tree.

Betty also expressed concerns regarding her age:

> I was afraid that I would be the oldest person in the class...in the whole school, even older than the instructors.

The intensity of these initial fears concerning ability, acceptance, and age subsided, but they never disappeared. They did, however, become less important as other problems arose.

I feel guilty, very guilty.

Respondents' responsibilities increased dramatically after they enrolled in the program. They had responsibilities as students in addition to their daily commitments as mothers, wives, and friends. As a consequence, it was necessary for them to alter their priorities in an effort to accommodate and fulfill these new demands. Respondents had always cared for and thought of others before themselves; now, for the first time, they placed their own needs and goals first. However, this change was not without emotional cost.

Betty realized she was risking her relationship with her fiance by putting herself first. She took her chances and won, but it was not easy for her:

> I felt very guilty, very guilty. I always worry about other people more than I worry about myself. This time I thought I am going to come first for a change. If he [my fiance] is not there when the dust settles, then he wasn't worth it.

Helen also took the risk, but she lost:

> My fiance and I have grown apart because I wasn't spending as much time with him. I always had to study. I thought he would understand because he went

> through six years of university. I thought if anyone should understand he would.

Pangs of guilt afflicted, in particular, the women who were mothers. "A good mother is supposed to be with her kids, whether they are doing something or not," remarked Nancy. "Your kids grow up so fast, and you can't make up for lost time," commented Sandra. Burdened with guilt, Sandra blamed not devoting enough time to her children on her poor management skills:

> It is a thing I have had to struggle with, and it is something that I'm working on this year, time management...to learn to manage my time better, so I can have time to take the kids swimming, and spend that little bit of family time...I haven't been organized enough to say, "O.K. we're going to sit down and play a game for three hours tonight. This is our time together."

How did she feel not spending quality time with her children?

> I feel like I'm not being a good enough parent.

Respondents also had less time to spend with extended family members and close friends. As a result, respondents feared these relationships might change or end completely. Betty explained:

> Some [family members] got quite upset, especially my mother. I wasn't visiting as much. I think it bothered her that I was going back to school.

Similarly, Nancy, who no longer had time to visit her friends, lamented she may have sacrificed their friendship as a consequence:

> ..I do miss the socializing with my friends. It is practically nil. And all year, if you do very little, they don't flock to your door during your holidays because you haven't been keeping up with them...it is a terribly lonely feeling.

Money, what money?

Lack of adequate finances presented another major problem for participants. Financial assistance was available through sponsoring agencies, student loans, and an emergency relief fund provided by the college. However, the assistance was never sufficient to free learners from financial worry. Sandra, who spoke from first hand experience, indicated the pervasiveness of the problem:

> The financial problem is the major one within this program. You are dealing with a lot of single parents....It causes a lot of stress.

For Linda, that stress interfered with her learning:

> I get discouraged about finances...twice now, once last year and once this year, I got to the point where I was actually thinking of quitting....When I was discouraged, I didn't feel like going ahead with my schoolwork. I goof around when I am discouraged; I can't concentrate....
>
> This morning, instead of doing my work, I was thinking about what I would feed my children for lunch. I'm not talking about whether it would be tuna or cheese; I wonder what...there's nothing there.

Betty, who had been employed in a well paying job, also experienced financial problems. They were of a different nature from Linda's, but just as important to Betty:

> I would not have been able to do it without Bill [her fiance]. He would give me money when I needed it. But I would feel guilty. I'd say, "I don't want to take

> your money; I want to try and do this the best I can, myself." I have always been so self-reliant. I've never liked asking anybody for anything.

The loss of independence affected Betty's pride. She did not want to be financially dependent, although it is a socially accepted state for women. She felt it lowered her self-esteem.

The women, however, became accustomed to managing with insufficient funds. It was a familiar burden that they had grown to tolerate: "I know to be satisfied with what I got until I can get what I want...," Linda remarked resignedly. "For me, I found a lot of [financial] stress last year, but now I am learning to deal with it. It has become a part of my life," commented Sandra. Acceptance of the problem was also implied through Anne's cavalier remark:

> I certainly don't have steak and lobster every day.

After all, was not their deplorable financial situation one of the driving forces behind their decision to return to school? When Helen was asked why she had entered the program, she responded:

> I could go on to continuing my education, and go on to

> a better job. Then we wouldn't have to be strapped wondering where the money is going to come from for even a bottle of milk or something. This way we could do things other than just stay at home and not do anything.

Financial problems, though not welcomed or even easy to bear, had to be accepted until changes in their personal circumstances occurred.

Tell me what to do.

Self-directed learning was the major method of instruction. This approach allowed respondents to be in charge of their own learning. In consultation with the instructors, participants planned their assignments and set up schedules within the confines of curriculum objectives and sponsors' time limits. Instructors acted as resource persons; they were facilitators, not teachers or lecturers.

The rationale of this method suggests adults learn best when given the opportunity to manage their own learning. Yet initially, this method engendered feelings of insecurity and anxiety:

> First I would have like to have had someone tell me what to do all the time. It would have made me feel more secure. But after you got used to the idea, it

> [self-directed learning] was good.

> It would have been nice if there had been more hand holding at the beginning. I felt lost and on my own because I wasn't use to the self-directed concept. I was used to the usual lecture type of instruction....

> I did have some trouble with that [self-directed learning], especially at the first. I'd get too excited about doing one thing and leaving other assignments. Budgeting my time was tough.

These initial feelings of insecurity and confusion never disappeared for some respondents; consequently, they found the strategies for self-direction difficult to master. Helen explained her dissatisfaction with self-directed learning:

> I'm the kind of person that needs a teacher now and then to tell me things before I can really understand.

In Helen's opinion, structure provides definite guidelines which eliminate any discrepancy between what is expected and what is actually done. She was in the last semester of the program, and she felt she still needed the same guidance and assistance she had received when she was in the ten program:

> The ten program was more structured; the eleven-twelve program is not so. In the ten program, the teachers were there; you could go to them and tell them that you didn't understand. They would sit down and help you out with it. But the eleven and twelve programs, a lot of it, you couldn't do that. It is self-directed, but you still need directions. Just because you are in the twelve level, I don't think the instructors should assume that you know everything and that there's no problem.

Helen's additional comments illuminated the frustration she felt:

> ...it is still very, very frustrating because I think they think I'm in the last stages of the program and that I don't need them anymore. To me, they [instructors] assume because we are adults we should automatically know what they want. We should be able to read between the lines.

Her frustration and discouragement evoked a harsh evaluation of what she perceived the role of instructors to be in the learning process:

> I'd say there should be more teaching, more classroom teaching and instructing, not just have the instructors sit there waiting for you to come to them.

With self-directed learning, time management is the learners' responsibility; there is no schedule enforced by an external source. This self-paced component of the program created a problem for some participants. One respondent, for example, became involved with extra-curricular activities. She devoted inordinate time and energy to these activities, and as a result, she was officially honored for that devotion. However, these activities took her away from her academic studies. She earned recognition for her leadership qualities, but she failed to complete her academic goals. This combination of success and failure led her to remark:

> One day I was a winner; one day I was a loser.

For her, guidelines and directions imposed externally would have provided the discipline she felt she lacked:

> I think it would be better if we had a little more structure because you are disciplined more. I know you are supposed to self-discipline yourself, but some of

> us have a difficult time with that...You get sidetracked so easily....It [structure] gives you more direction...a more solid foundation.

Nevertheless, self-directed learning allowed some respondents to work independently and thus shielded them from competition, a protection insecure learners appreciated.

Don't pit me against the other guy.

Some learners, who felt particularly vulnerable and insecure about their academic abilities, dreaded group work or other situations where their ideas and performances were open to criticism or comparison. These respondents viewed such situations as competition, not cooperation, even though they knew sharing ideas broadened and enriched their own thoughts and opinions. Linda explained:

> In a group, I think, what is the matter with me? Why didn't I think of that? Or I will think of it, and maybe I don't think it is good enough to mention in a group. Somebody else mentions it, then I think, "I thought that. Why didn't I say something?" Then I feel even more discouraged.

The effects of group work were harsh on Linda:

> I get so uptight with myself because I don't come out as good as they [other students] are doing. I push myself harder....I can't sleep at nights. I can't talk to my kids because I've got to do this and this....

Group work and competition intimidated Nancy, also:

> ...you would really have to work hard to keep up to the group. If you didn't, you would be disappointing everybody...and if you are writing tests at the same time, you would be competing and be the one with the lower mark.

Later, she commented:

> If somebody found one thing so easy that I found difficult, I would wonder why. I thought I would have to work harder, for it shouldn't be that hard.

Group sharing induced feelings of inadequacy. Defensiveness, which often accompanies feelings of inadequacy, was so strong for some women that they became suspicious of their fellow students. For these respondents, group work provided an opportunity to be deceived:

> Even in discussions with Sam, we will be talking over material and then we do it up, and he gets a better mark. Then I wonder why. We just discussed all that, and he's got the better mark. Then I would like to take it and just cram it down his throat. I think, "Did you not do what we discussed? Were you holding back?"

> Initially, I was very reluctant [to enter group sharing]. As far as schoolwork goes, you felt they were going to take your work and ideas.

As a consequence, some respondents distrusted their peers' motives and intentions:

> I have to wonder why they are being nice to me. Is it because they want my information or do they like me as a person?

Moreover, some women construed sharing and cooperating as cheating:

> I don't like the cheating that goes on...Yet I know I help people cheat...They use my stuff too much and too often just to be getting ideas....I don't mind the sharing part of it. It is just when I see they are way

> behind, then I see they are catching up to me in a speed that I couldn't do even if I was superhuman, and yet nobody seems to catch on they are moving so fast.

Cheating was not just an ethical issue for this participant. Resentment toward learners and instructors is implicit in her comments. She resented the learners who cheated and the instructors who allowed themselves to be deceived by the cheaters.

Instructors have degrees; they're above us.

Respondents viewed the instructors to be, by virtue of their knowledge and education, in a position of superiority. Respondents frequently referred to the relationship between instructors and learners in spacial terms. In this perception, the learners assumed an inferior position based on the difference in levels of education:

> They have gone to university....They are at the top already, where I am just starting at the bottom.

> They have the degrees you don't. You're just struggling to get that. They should know what they are doing. You don't know what you are doing.

> ...I figure they know more than I do. That's the reason I am here; I don't know.

Helen distinguished between academic knowledge and common sense, and concluded the former was more useful:

> ...they have a knowledge, better answers ...not about life, but about things that can correct the way I am living.

According to respondents, educated people such as the instructors have credentials and expertise, and therefore possess authority. When one respondent was asked who she perceived to have authority in society, she responded:

> ...anybody that has a better education than me.

Some respondents regarded instructors' authority tantamount to the authority granted to other powerful figures in our culture. At first, Nancy viewed instructors as being "like the queen or the government. They were to be respected and obeyed." Linda granted them even more power; to her they were "god-like."

Eventually, respondents discovered instructors to "really be down to earth." Nevertheless, respondents were always cognizant of the difference between teachers and students. "They are the instructor and I am just the pupil. They know the information," reiterated Helen. Therefore, "they are higher or better than any of us," decided Linda. Although instructors were not as intimidating as first imagined, "they still have that authority," voiced Helen.

Nowhere did the respondents feel more subjected to, and affected by, that authority than in the area of evaluation. Participants agreed that marks determined academic success or failure. Marks provided concrete evidence of a learner's ability and potential. Marks signified progress. They signified if or when, and with what standing, an academic goal was reached. Therefore, they ultimately decided one's future. Nancy's personal comments effectively captured what she and the other respondents considered the significance of marks to be:

> They were important because they did represent how well I did it, how well I knew it. If it was a low mark that meant that I didn't know it that well, or I didn't do it very well. And that is what determines whether you pass or fail.

Another respondent commented:

> A high mark is an indication that I am learning, that I

> am using my brain. It is not an indication that I am smart. I think I am smart; everybody is smart. It is just the way they use what they have.

When they received high marks, the reaction was positive:

> It means a lot. It makes me feel good about myself.

However, when they received poor marks, the opposite effect occurred:

> You get kind of resentful, or there might be some feelings of anger. If you have put some time into something and you feel you have done something to the best of your ability and it gets torn apart, that's a little hard to take.

Implicit is that the real determiner of a learner's success or failure is not the mark, but the instructor who issues that mark. While the respondents knew that instructors judged learners' performances based on some system, the respondents did not always understand how this system operated. Sometimes they found the rules to be inconsistent and unclear and blamed instructors' whims and personal opinions. For example, Sandra had reason to believe this when she handed what she assumed was a grammatically correct paragraph to two different instructors.

> I had a paragraph and I showed it to one instructor, and she said that it was good. Then I showed it to another instructor, and she said that I should change things around and put things differently. But if I put it that way, I would be writing that instructor's way; I wouldn't be expressing it the way I say it or I wanted to express it.

Helen speculated that the friendliness between some instructors and some learners was one reason for the inconsistencies in marking:

> Well, sometimes I think there is teacher favoritism. When I look at my paper and at someone else's, I will think that mine is best...they [instructors] are more on a friendly line; there is more give for the person they are friendly with than the person they don't really know.

Similarly, instructors' methods of evaluation perplexed Linda:

> There is something I have often wondered about. Mary would write an article and get a 2.5 or 3.0. And I would read it and think that my little girls could do this or better. Then I would hand in mine and sometimes my mark would be less, and I know I did better than that.

She wondered if the instructors marked according to a learner's ability, not performance: "Do they say, I know what she is capable of; she could have done better than this, and so I'll mark her a little harder?" If so, "I would then feel better about my marks because I would feel like they think I could do better," she concluded. However, she was not sure.

Moreover, respondents were not always sure or clear about what the instructors expected on assignments. At times they found the directions and the evaluation criteria too vague. As a result, respondents voiced a desire for more clarity and guidance. Helen stated:

> ...if they would just give you an outline to say, "This is what we expect. You can do what you want, but this is what we expect out of what you are ~~doing~~." Then you know. There are boundaries; you can expand those boundaries, but there are still basic boundaries.

The ambiguity frustrated and discouraged her:

> ..Nine times out of ten I don't [succeed]; I have to do it again. It is not what they [instructors] wanted...often the objectives and evaluation don't coincide. I feel so dumb. I feel maybe I'm so dumb I can't even get the instructions right...you feel belittled.

Another participant related a similar complaint:

> ..the objectives in the module don't always match what is on the test. It is very frustrating. If you want to give me multiplication, then give me multiplications, but don't lead me off into algebra. That has nothing to do with plain ordinary multiplications.

Linda found the instructors' expectations not only confusing, but unrealistic as well:

> The only thing is, is that I don't think like that. So I don't understand sometimes why that would be expected of me, when I don't think like they do. For one thing, I don't have the education. I have spent forty-eight

> years of my life talking like I do and writing like I do. Then all of a sudden I am supposed to sound super intelligent and use these fancy words that don't even come into my head....Instructors' answers are in a way that they would write them; it comes out so intelligent, so educated. I am not there yet; I just started into this. It is hard for me; it's hard to break habits.

In addition, respondents did not always understand the personalized or individualized aspect of self-directed learning. Some learners did fewer assignments than others, but received the same credits. The rationale for the differences was unclear to the respondents; thus, they again attributed the inconsistencies to instructors' whims and personal opinions:

> The thing that bothers me is the lack of standards in marking....Some people could do two assignments where other people would have to do six. I didn't see the fairness in that. I tried to see the individuality aspect of it, but I still saw the unfairness in it.

This particular respondent was one who did not have to do all the assignments. Nevertheless, she felt this special treatment was unfair and therefore avoided telling her peers about her good fortune:

> I believe I didn't have to do them all because I achieved proficiency, so the instructor felt I didn't require all of it. I was happy; it lightened my load. But I also felt guilty....I didn't want to tell anybody about it. I thought they would have negative feelings about me. They may think I was a suckhole or that kind of thing.

Nancy also disapproved of the differences in learners' assignments. Variations in assignments prevented her from using one of her most valuable resources, her peers:

> But no two people were told to do the same thing, and so that was difficult because you couldn't go to another person and ask, "How did you do this?" They'd tell you, but no two people were told the same thing.

Inconsistencies in evaluation and workloads frustrated some learners, and this frustration intensified as they neared the end of the program. Future plans depended on the marks they received, but respondents felt the instructors' whims, not learners' efforts, determined the marks. In Nancy's view, she was at the mercy of the instructors:

> Well, I didn't always agree with my mark, but what can you do? They [instructors] are the ones that determine what you will have in the end, and that often determines what program you can get into after.

Linda's frustration was equally apparent:

> Last year in Communications, I passed with a 3.5, and now I am down to 2.5. I felt really hurt and disappointed. I have talked to [the instructor]...So [the instructor] takes out the book and tells me I am doing really good. He says, "Do you know what a 2.0 or a 2.5 means?" Yes, but I know that a 3.0 means I can get into my course. I can't get into the program unless I'm okayed.

In her past, Linda had been controlled by a domineering mother and an abusive husband. She judged her experiences with evaluation to be similar to her experiences with her mother and husband: "It puts you back into this little pressure cooker you've taken yourself out of," she said bitterly. Through evaluation, instructors controlled her future, just as her mother and husband had once controlled it.

Evaluations based on standards that respondents viewed as unclear at best and nonexistent at worst confused, frustrated, and angered the women. Confusion became frustration; frustration led to anger, but often the anger turned to resignation.

> Well, if you struggle along the best you can and you don't know for sure what you are supposed to be doing, it is difficult. . You think, "I guess I will just do what I think and try to get done with it."

One respondent felt there was little point in approaching the instructors:

> You feel, "What is the sense? They are going to do the same thing." So you do the best you can. That's all you can do.

Another respondent concurred:

> ...we were always told that marks were not important. I didn't feel that the instructor would change his mind. I am just thinking of this one particular thing that I did. I thought I would get a higher mark, but I didn't get a high mark. We were always told the mark was not important, so there was no sense in discussing it.

As with marks, instructors' comments and attitudes also influenced how the respondents viewed themselves, their ambitions, and their goals. Respondents gained confidence in their abilities and ambitions if they perceived the instructors' comments, attitudes, and perceptions as positive. However, the converse occurred if respondents viewed the instructors' attitudes to be negative. Helen explained:

> Sometimes I get the feeling instructors feel...it doesn't matter how you get through. I feel they don't really think this is a course where people will go on. You almost get the feeling they think we are just taking up space...you'll never get off welfare. It makes me feel - what am I trying so hard for?

Another respondent voiced a similar complaint:

> ...Some instructors, not all of them, maybe one or two, who did not, I didn't feel, have the best interests of the students at heart....They were just kind of strutting their stuff....You didn't want to ask for help or anything because you didn't feel that they wanted to help. They were standoffish.

Encouragement and Support Received

The problems that the respondents experienced as they ventured through the program varied in kind, degree, frequency, and sequence. The effect of these difficulties also varied, depending on the respondents' self-concepts, their past experiences, and the dynamics of the problems. Yet, the respondents were able to either resolve or accommodate their own personal conflicts. How?

Damned if I'm going to quit.

Determination to obtain their goals and to make something of their lives enabled the participants to overcome many problems they encountered. They were intent on proving to themselves that they did, in fact, merit a grade twelve certificate. They felt they had failed once; this time they were determined to succeed:

> One thing, I wanted to prove something to myself. I wanted to apply myself to do the best to my ability partly because I never applied myself in school before. I wanted to see how well I could do. It is something to prove to myself that I got what it takes - I've got the potential; I've got the brains; I've got the ability.

> Stick with this? Because be damned if I am going to

> give up. That's all there is to it. I want something out of life, and I don't want to be a quitter again.
>
> ...basically the determination not to fail again. You just think, "I'm going to do this." So you can say, "This is the first time I really stuck it out."

Doubts expressed by people whom the respondents respected, or whom they wanted to have respect them, also motivated some respondents to excel. An aunt's critical remark created an intense desire in Betty to prove her aunt wrong:

> She and I are very close, but she did tell someone else, who, of course, told me, that I would never get my grade twelve. She felt I would never stick with it. I couldn't believe that she said that, so from the very beginning I said to myself not only am I going to do this, but I am going to do very well. She came to my graduation; she was very happy for me.

Likewise, after Sandra decided to resume her studies, she revealed her doubts about her learning potential to her aunt. Her aunt's response, though hurtful, was a source of motivation:

> And my aunt's comment was, "Sandra, even dumb people can make it if they apply themselves." And I thought, "I am going to prove you wrong. I just want to throw something in your face. I'm going to prove you wrong. It is all right for me to call myself down, but don't you do it."

A profound desire to complete the program and reap its rewards, combined with inner strength, enabled many of the respondents to persevere. Their personal philosophies conveyed a source of inner strength. Anne explained her philosophy:

> But like I used to tell the kids, when you are down and everything is against you, get down on the floor, pick yourself up, and dust yourself off, and keep going.

Instructors believed I could do it.

The determination to succeed allowed the respondents to face a variety of problems, but it did little to weaken the formidable force of doubt concerning their learning ability and their future ambitions. A positive voice was needed to encourage the women to view themselves as learners. Instructors provided that voice:

> ...the instructors gave you so much encouragement.

> Like, "You can do it, you have come here, you have made the decision to come back to school, if you made that decision you can make it."

> I think it is the instructors, as well as the peers,...who keep drilling into you that you can, you can, so you do. That right there just boosts your self-esteem. You just learn that you are like everyone else, and you can do it, too.

> I did well; I was really amazed. They [instructors] tell me I can really do math. I thought I was one of the people who couldn't do math...

In time the respondents discovered that instructors were "down to earth" and "quite ordinary people," who treated the respondents like friends. This offer of friendship indicated to the women that they were valued for who they were and for what they were attempting to accomplish.

> You could develop a friendship with them, and that was great. You felt that we were all working for one goal, and if that had not been, I think we would have been hindered very greatly in our learning.

> Some of the teachers who have taken a personal interest in you and are willing to sit by and give you a pat on the back, that makes it really worthwhile. It is encouraging to know you are doing something.
>
> I guess the one thing that really meant the most to me, encouraged me, kept me going, and makes me feel good about myself is that [names of two instructors] really like me, or lead me to believe they really like me.

Linda, who made the last comment, elaborated on the importance of her relationship with instructors. She and one instructor, in particular, teased one another. Her additional comments reveal the significance this relationship had for her:

> It puts the instructors on the same level as me. I noticed I don't tease with my peers as much. But I really like teasing with the instructors. It makes me feel like I'm on their level or they are on mine, as being, I guess, O.K. to talk to, coming down to my level.

Through teasing, Linda felt that she was accepted as an individual. This was something that had not happened to her as a child or as a young married women.

Respondents were adamant that instructors' support, encouragement, and friendship enhanced personal and academic growth. Most learners had one or two instructors that they related to better than others. Betty, however, found all instructors helpful, as the following words verify:

> The instructors, even the ones I had nothing to do with, were always there to help. Instructors helped you in any way they could.

We are all in the same boat.

Respondents quickly discovered their classmates, as well as their instructors, offered support and encouragement. Peers were "in the same boat...after the same thing...," with similar fears, doubts, and worries. Comfort was found in sharing common experiences, giving respondents confidence that perhaps their feelings of uncertainty and anxiety were normal under the circumstances. Nancy explained:

> I realized that everyone felt the same as I did. Everyone was apprehensive; they didn't know if they could do it. They didn't feel very smart, most of them. We were just a bunch of people who were all the

> same.... It was good for my self-confidence to know others felt the same way.

Respondents felt a sense of equality and acceptance among this "bunch of people who were all the same," an equality and acceptance not always felt in the larger community:

> Nobody else here has any great standards for themselves, so they don't expect them of you...And in that way, you don't have those uppity standards to have to survive under, fight against.

> People [in the program] accepted me for who I was and who I am now. They are not expecting great achievements.

Common goals, desires, pressures, and worries provided the bases for the development of close friendships. Of course, as with any situation where people are closely connected, disagreements and arguments were common occurrences. Still, within the larger group, small cohesive groups formed, offering support and understanding to their members.

> My peers helped me through some very difficult times,

> little problems at home. They would listen and maybe give advice or their ideas. They were very important. When I think back at the other school I never had any close friends. You didn't get that close.

> ...when things were bad, there was always someone around to bring me up. Someone to say don't stop now. Look what you have done.

> I didn't carry things with me for long. If I felt there was nothing I could do about it, I would talk to other friends, relating problems I had. It helped. They were encouraging.

At times though, the compassion and concern the learners felt for one another became a burden. Sandra, who was a compassionate person, paid a heavy price because she cared:

> I have a lot of students disclose to me. I find that very depressing at times... You hear all the negatives. You are dealing with people you have learned to care about. For me, I guess that is just part of my nature. I want to take the world in my arms and hold it and make everything all better, and you can't do that. And I don't know how to totally let go

of that.

As well as emotional support, peers also provided academic support:

> It is nice to know that there are so many people working right beside you or in the classroom that have already gone through the assignments. You always have help. If the instructors are busy, there are others that will help.

They shared their ideas and opinions and learned from one another's experiences. Sometimes instructors organized these sharing sessions, but just as often the learners formed their own groups.

> I loved the group work because you get other people's opinions and other people's ideas, and you can put them into yours. It is kind of like brainstorming.

> I think the reason I liked group work was because you have so many people and you learn so much. Everybody has a different point of view, and if you are open-minded enough you can take little bits and pieces from here and there and put them all together and find you own opinion.

> There is always a question that is not answered. Someone else may have different ideas of it. So, you put your ideas, and his idea, and her ideas together, and you come up with something...

Peer support complemented instructor support in fostering personal and academic growth. The concern respondents felt for one another was an essential and integral part of their learning. As a consequence, respondents who were near the end of the program, were frightened at the thought of striking out on their own without the support of their peers and instructors. They had come to rely on these people as one does one's family. For Helen, it was like leaving home for the first time:

> ...where do I go from here? It is almost a let down because the program is almost done now. You get this feeling, "Oh, wow, I don't have that family type of thing."

I was treated like an adult.

The program is a component of adult education, and therefore, its prevailing philosophy is to treat students as mature learners. An assumption reflected in this philosophy is that adults are capable of managing their own learning. The respondents appreciated and enjoyed having this responsibility. Nancy explained:

> I felt in control. I felt I had some say. I didn't feel like in the school I went to before, they were in control of your life. Here you are in control of your own to a certain extent, and that felt good. I didn't want to be treated as a child.

Anne was even more definite about how she wanted to be treated:

> If an instructor did treat me like a child, I know that person and I would have a talking to because I don't feel I am a child at my age, and I don't expect to be treated like a child.

Some respondents were surprised that they were considered as adults. They assumed they would be treated in a similar manner to when they were in high school. Betty, in particular, was amazed at the difference:

> ..it is not like high school. You are not going to be yelled at; you are not going to be lectured; you are not going to have to go to the principal's office if you do something wrong. It is for adults and they

> treat you as such.

When Betty was asked if she enjoyed the treatment, she emphatically replied:

> Definitely! To be treated like a human being. When I was in high school, kids seemed to be subhuman, a nuisance to be put up with and not a person.

Likewise, other participants expressed views indicating this new experience had definite advantages over typical schooling situations, advantages that enhanced their learning:

> I also had trouble remembering that no one is going to punish you if you don't do your work. This is nice because it alleviates a lot of pressure. Also you are doing it for yourself, nobody else.

> If you can learn something you are interested in, you are going to do a better job and learn more. Where if you are told what to do and you are not interested in it, I know I just work to get through it.

> It [responsibility for my learning] gave me a sense of - I can do this and I am doing this. It gives you a

> sense of self-worth. I am doing this, not anybody else.

For some, responsibility for their own education fostered a zest for learning:

> It allows you the freedom to learn what you want to learn. By learning what you want to learn, it starts opening up doors. I found through the things I have learned that there is so much to learn and how little you really know. It makes learning a lot more fun. It makes your interests grow.

One of the responsibilities of managing one's own learning is setting personal time limits and deadlines for assignments. This permits learners to work at their own pace. Some participants mentioned how important this feature was to their learning:

> Well, I can work at my own pace....If I get it done in two days, that's O.K. I think if we were told we had to have X number of pages done today in a certain time, I don't think we could. It would be very stressful.

> I have my own time limit, because I want to get grade 12 done. But I still don't feel that anyone is

> breathing down my neck. That is me. And if I fail at it that's my - I can't stand this, you know, you got to have this done right now....someone looking and saying, "Are you done this?" or, "Why aren't you finished by now?"

> When I found that I didn't have to keep up with anybody, then I relaxed more. My grades weren't as good as before but I was happier.

The freedom to manage their own learning meant a variety of activities were happening simultaneously. Consequently, a relaxed and informal atmosphere prevailed. Learners came and went freely, discussed openly, and chatted casually. Linda, now in her third year, remembered with fondness the pleasant surprise she received when she witnessed the learning environment on her first day:

> To me I pictured rows of desks, and a teacher at the head of the group. It was a shock to me when I saw what it was. People were sitting having coffee; Bill was watching T.V. It just blew my mind. And no one was getting after them. It was overwhelming. I just couldn't believe it....I was going to be away from home and have fun at the same time.

Joys of Learning

The respondents proceeded through the program sometimes with ease, sometimes with great difficulty, depending on the interplay of problems and support in effect at any particular time. As they despaired over failure, rejoiced in success, and battled with frustration, respondents gained insights into who they were, what inner strengths they possessed, and how they were changing and growing.

> [I have changed] Like daylight and dark. It is not even daylight and dawn, but daylight and dark. I can't believe it. I wouldn't have even been able to sit and talk to you like this before.

> I feel a lot better. I still have areas that I need to work on; we always will. But I am on the way; I am on the right track.

> I've grown in so many areas; I mean I'm still growing. I have so much growing to do.

What were these areas of improvement? What made the difference between the daylight and the dark? Through moments of revelation and insight, the respondents learned to be more self-confident, to value themselves, to relate more effectively with others, and to be more tolerant.

I can still learn.

The fear that they were "stupid" was always present; therefore, when respondents discovered they could learn, they were overjoyed. Betty expressed how realizing she could still learn affected her:

> I feel really confident, really self-assured. I feel like I have the world by the tail...I feel really good about myself and feel like I can do anything. This was the worst part, just getting back into learning.

This comment was from a person who viewed herself as "a fast learner," and who "liked learning." The effect was even more profound for those whose self-perceptions were more negative:

> If five years ago you told me that I could learn something if I went back to school, I would probably have told you, "No way. You are out of your tree." ...I know now that I can learn something like I never did in my life.

They began to relax when they realized they could learn:

> I wanted to prove to myself I could do it and could do it well. When I found out I could do well, and was

> amazed that I could, it [the pressure] let up.

This new perception of themselves as learners enabled them to have the confidence to question other people's points of view and opinions. Some no longer believed unequivocally that instructors were right, so they began to examine and evaluate this "voice of authority." When Nancy was asked how she responded to points of view she did not agree with, she answered:

> I would question it, perhaps. Of if I felt it was better not to question it, I would leave it, but I would not necessarily believe it.

This was in contrast to her approach at the beginning of the program. If she held an opinion different from the instructors', she "would have thought that I was wrong," and they were right. Likewise, Sandra, who relied on personal experiences to gain knowledge, felt she had gained more confidence to express disagreement:

> I would say this is the way I feel. This is my personal experience. To me, what better way to know something than to experience it....I would be more so now than I was then, but I still think I would have expressed myself to a certain degree. It would have

> taken a little bit more courage back then than now. Now I would come forward really quite easily.

Another respondent, whose self-confidence had been destroyed by an abusive relationship, also realized she was not always wrong. She related an event in which her interpretation of a short story was different from the instructor's. The respondent's approach was timid, yet her new-found confidence enabled her to persist:

> I was trying to make my views his views [the instructor's]....I kept trying to figure out what he was trying to tell me....He'd ask the questions, and I would answer his questions, but then I would say why I thought the way I did. I would show him maybe a word or something that made me think the way I thought....I can't say that I stuck to my guns about it, about being right. I just couldn't grasp what he was trying to tell me.

When the instructor agreed that the respondent's interpretation was more accurate, she felt,

> "Ecstatic. I feel so good. I mean that was the best - that was my 3.0 I was crying about."

An awareness of their abilities to learn enabled respondents to realize they may possess other abilities. They began to feel better about themselves and, thus evaluated their entire lives more positively. Linda, for example, was able to recognize her many accomplishments, once she began to think of herself as a learner:

> I am proving to myself that I'm not as stupid as I thought I was, and I am going to school at the age I am. I think, you know, I have been ten years alone and I do have it nice. I have a nice home and nice kids. I am picking my own self up.

Hey look, I'm me.

For the first time, respondents viewed themselves as individuals worthy of a place in their social world. They became more outgoing and more assertive, possessing the courage to venture out into the larger community:

> I have been going to ball games; I have been going to the theatre. I can now approach these people and I say, "Hi! ...What do you do?" I have more confidence to say "Hey look, I'm me."

They realized their inner selves contained unique and special identities with opinions and beliefs that were worthwhile. They now had the confidence to state these ideas:

> I am more open to give my opinion on things. I don't sit back all the time and say that this person is right, and what I have got to say doesn't count. I am willing to give an opinion.

> They [peers] started saying, "Do you want to go out for coffee?" or "Can you help me with my homework?" or "Do you understand that?" They see me as someone who is not just dumb or stupid. They see me as someone who can actually help them, and that my opinion matters.

> ...I used to go with the crowd with any ideas. I learned I had my own ideas and I didn't have to go with everybody else's, that they weren't necessarily right.

The revelation that they were persons with valued opinions and ideas had an amazing effect:

> I grew up apologizing for being born. I don't do that anymore. I don't feel like that awful person that I felt before, so I don't feel I have to apologize.

> I have a lot of people that come to me to talk. I'm

> not shy; I'm not withdrawn. I feel that I'm just as good as anyone else.
>
> ....I always do a lot of comparing and I always come down short. But I am not doing that so much now. I am discovering that I am just as good.

Knowing they were "just as good" enabled them to demand respect from their families and friends in ways they had never done before:

> I never got any respect when I was a little kid, or when I was married. My ideas were never respected; my feelings were never respected....now I deserve respect sometimes, and I like to have it. Now I ask for it.
>
> Boy that feels good, when someone wants me to do something, they can usually talk me into it. Not now. I just yell, "NO!" Then I laugh. It works.
>
> I used to be very shy; I used to let people walk all over me...Now, I say, "Hey, no more." And they don't like that.

They also had more confidence to be assertive with complete strangers. Many examples were cited in which they were no longer willing to let people "walk all over" them:

> When I am driving my car and somebody cuts me off, I will shake my fist at him. I have never done that before.

> ...I was once afraid to answer the telephone. Everybody was right and I was wrong. Now, I am not afraid to go in and talk about my telephone bills any more. Like, I can't pay it this month, but I will pay it next month. I know they will not come and put me in jail because I can't [pay].

> If a salesman came to your door, you were kind; you didn't want to hurt their feelings. If they said you would win a trip if you bought something, you would want to help them out. Now, I can see through a lot of those things. I can say no now without being rude, of course.

They not only demand respect from others, but they demanded it from themselves also. They started to consider their own wants, needs and desires:

> I was giving so much of myself out in other areas, like to people, always to other people and not to myself...

> I have more time for myself. I have less stress...
>
> ...I just learned that I am a person. I always worried about others, never about myself. I've learned to worry about myself a little bit, and I feel better about myself. It is amazing, you know.
>
> ....it was about time I started looking after my own needs instead of everybody else's...because I feel I am important to myself. My goals and my achievements and where I'm going to take my life are more up front now.

Selfishness, they soon discovered, was not always negative. When they started to respect themselves by tending to their own needs and desires, the effect snowballed. To their surprise, other people also began to treat them with greater respect and recognition. Betty explained the effect:

> Because I feel better about myself, my personal relationships have gotten much better. I feel like I am a person, that I am worth something. I think other people see that in me now. They feel better towards me, too. I think you have to care for yourself before you can expect others to care for you.

I now live to my own standards.

Respondents, to differing degrees, were very sensitive to the opinions that other people had of them. The extent to which the they allowed these opinions to control their behavior and emotions depended on their self-esteem and self-confidence. Linda's case may have been extreme, but it illustrates the negative effect other people may have on someone who lacks confidence.

> ....I would just start crying and getting all upset. I'd be afraid to face them the next day because if they really thought that horribly of me then I should never be around them.

However, she was not as sensitive to other people's criticisms, once she gained confidence in herself.

> Then I gradually started finding myself and not having to live to other people's - that's what I like best about coming here - I don't have to live to other people's standards of me. I can live to my own. Like they might not like what I am, who I am. But I do. That is what counts.

Similarly, Helen was able to "take a joke," once she felt accepted by others and thus accepted herself:

> Before I felt everybody was out to get me. Anything they said was directed at me. Then I slowly learned not to take things that way. They would say jokes, you know, joke around. I would go home and take that joke personally....Now I can take a joke.

Linda and Helen started liking themselves. However, this experience was not unique just to them. Other respondents also began to realize they possessed some worthwhile traits and attributes that offset their perceived flaws and shortcomings.

> ...you are with people that accept you and through them you learn to accept yourself. You learn to say "Hey look, not everything you do has to be perfect."

> I used to worry if they didn't like this about me, then they don't like me. But I found out that's O.K. Maybe they don't like this about me, but they like other things about me. So we just drop what they don't like.

> I used to be a very nervous person, even with people that I know. I guess maybe I feel that they were watching really closely, or I was afraid I wouldn't say the right thing and come across as dumb. Now, it

> doesn't bother me if I have to say I don't know something.

They began to put things in perspective. Energy once spent reacting negatively to other people's comments was reserved for positive reactions. Linda's remarks indicate this change:

> Now if I think they really said something to hurt me, I just go home and analyze why they would say that about me. Then I ask if I really believe that about myself, and if I do believe that about myself, then it is something I better smarten up in. If I don't, that is their tough bananas. They shouldn't have said it to me.

Similarly, another respondent who once was hurt by instructors' criticism had gained the confidence to view the comments from a different perspective:

> But I think I have changed even in that area because I find that now when I go to an instructor and if I get criticism it is constructive criticism. I think that is the reason why I have changed in that area because I realize that the only reason why they are criticizing my work is not because they want to hurt me or put me

> down, it is only because they want me to grow, and become more effective in my writing or whatever.

These new self-indentities enabled some respondents to take charge of their own happiness. For example, Nancy no longer allowed her emotional state to be affected by her husband's moods. Knowledge of herself as an unique person permitted her to live with her husband as a separate person with her own identity.

> If he [husband] is not happy, it doesn't matter. I can still be happy. I don't depend on him for my happiness....life still goes on even though he may be unhappy about something. That was my whole life before. His job was my life, too, now I have my own [life].

Moreover, she did not allow her father's lack of approval and affection to affect her life as it once did:

> I don't think my father ever thought I would make it this far. I don't think he thought I could do it. I used to be really nervous around him....Now it doesn't bother me any more....I just figure that that is the way he is. I am not going to let him, the way he is, affect my life.

I'm more willing to accept other people.

As the women acquired more self-confidence and became less defensive, they grew more tolerant of values and beliefs that differed from theirs. Nancy explained:

> There are a lot of different personalities at school. You can't expect people to think the way you do. You have to be pretty flexible.
>
> And I am finding out about other people. Like there are certain people I used to find really upsetting. Now I see there are other things about them, and maybe they have backgrounds as bad as mine or worse.

Another respondent made a similar comment:

> One good experience was the different backgrounds people come from. You learn to accept them. They are O.K. even if they come from a different background, and that you are not much better.

Sandra, who had been abused as a child, decided that

> ...for every cause there is an effect. It [education] just opened doors that made me aware that why I have been travelling down this rough and rocky road is

> because of my environment as a child. And this can be changed; the pattern can be broken.

She gained important knowledge that helped her to understand her past and to explain her behavior. She was willing to extend that same understanding to her peers:

> People are victims of circumstance. People don't have the right to judge too much because they really don't know what walk of life another person has come from, or what causes certain behavior in people.

Betty previously had judged certain people without fully understanding their "walk of life." However, she regretted her judgments once she got to know these people:

> One thing that I learned since I started was that people make a lot of judgments about others. Until you get to know them and who they are, you just can't go making rash statements about people....I have made a lot of statements about women with kids on welfare. I thought they never tried to better themselves. But I have never been in that position....I feel really bad now about some of the things I have said. It was just through ignorance.

I did it! I really did it!

Involvement in the program enabled the respondents to be more confident, assertive, and tolerant, and less defensive. However, this personal growth was not sufficient to remove the doubts and fears that still consumed the respondents who had not yet completed the program. Helen's comments reveal how, for her, only graduation could alleviate these doubts and fears:

> I feel good, but I don't think I will feel good, really good, until I'm done. Then I can say, "I did it, really did it."

For Helen, graduation meant she will have accomplished her first goal, the obtainment of basic knowledge and skills allowing her to "go on" to another program. More importantly, completion meant she will be on her way to becoming a somebody.

Other respondents made similar remarks summarizing the significance of graduation. Linda, for example, claimed that receiving her grade twelve certificate would confirm her capabilities as a learner and her worthiness as a person. Moreover, with her certificate as concrete proof, these positive attributes could never be denied. Therefore, she felt that failure to succeed in the next program, a career program, would not be as devastating, for failure would not necessarily be because of her inability to learn. Acquisition of her grade twelve certificate will have proven that.

Perhaps, Betty, a recent graduate, confirmed Helen's and Linda's predictions concerning the effects of graduation when she exclaimed:

> I feel really good about myself and feel like I can do anything.

Fear of the Future

Am I out of my tree?

As they approached graduation, the respondents awaited their next step with eagerness and excitement. However, they also awaited the future with the same apprehension and nervousness they felt before entering this program. No one said it better than Helen:

> I don't know, it's [the educational process] like having a baby. You get your pre-jitters, then you get your post-jitters.

What are the "post-jitters"? Sandra explained:

> It is sort of like the fear of getting back into the world, going to work, applying myself, being

> accepted...basically the same things over again.

Moreover, the "post-jitters" consist of the same doubts concerning their ability. Linda confessed:

> I really think I am capable of being a nurse's aide. But I don't know....[Maybe] I am asking too much of myself and I'm not going to be able to do it.

With her past looming large in her mind, Linda feared that perhaps she was capable of no more than she had been:

> What scares me is getting into a situation that would throw me back.

Like most of the respondents, Linda had gained more control of her life, but not complete control. But as one respondent realistically observed, complete control may not be possible:

> ...I don't think there is too much security in anything....I hope that I will have some sort of security and I can have a half decent pay cheque to make my life a little easier. But I'm not totally secure about that because there doesn't seem to be too much security for anybody.

CHAPTER IV

EMERGING THEMES

During the initial analysis, data were grouped into clusters. These clusters disclosed the various experiences respondents underwent as participants in an upgrading program. Not every respondent encountered the experiences represented in each subgroup. However, three themes emerged that were fundamental to each woman's reactions, perceptions, and feelings concerning her learning experiences. These themes were redefinition of self, definitions of knowing, and approaches to learning.

Redefinition of Self

All respondents expressed, to differing degrees, how they had grown and changed while participating in the program. Their self-concepts were redefined and transformed as they engaged in new experiences and gained a deeper understanding of who they were and who they wanted to be. This transformation of self induced changes in the women's attitudes, values, and behaviors.

The redefining process affected the respondents positively only if these changes in attitude and behavior were congruent with the idealized self and were confirmed by those with whom they interacted. However, sometimes these changes were denied by their close associates or were incongruent with the idealized self. Both of these circumstances evoked stress and anxiety, affecting the women's self-esteem and self-confidence, and their relationships with family, friends, peers, or instructors.

Moreover, though their self-concepts were constantly changing, they were specific at any one moment (Brundage and Mackeracher, 1980), and they determined the participants' responses to learning. Participants' reactions toward the learning activities varied during the redefining process, depending on what specific characteristic of the new self had been confirmed or denied, how respondents reacted to the new self, and how closely related the new self was to the idealized self.

Definitions of Knowing

Respondents described their learning experiences, revealing what type of knowledge they thought to be most valuable in gaining truth and understanding, and how they acquired this valued information. For example, some women placed greater emphasis on academic knowledge than on experiential knowledge. Consequently, they credited those with higher education with possessing superior knowledge, and therefore, having "better answers." In this particular case, respondents perceived instructors as knowing "what they [were] doing" because "they [had] the degrees." Therefore, respondents depended on the instructors to dispense truth and knowledge.

Other participants felt that knowledge gained from experience had greater significance. "What better way to know something than to experience it," voiced one respondent. These respondents relied on intuition and feelings to gain an understanding of their worlds; their knowledge came from an internal source, not external. Consequently, they viewed instructors more as purveyors of encouragement and validation than purveyors of knowledge.

Still other learners viewed academic and experiential knowledge as equally valuable and essential to knowing. These women used their own experiences to understand academic knowledge, and conversely used academic knowledge to understand their experiences. This ability to integrate both types of knowing enabled the learners to use internal and external frames of reference to facilitate learning. Respondents perceived instructors as just one of the many external learning resources available.

Approaches to Learning

The third theme, approaches to learning, determined the way in which the learners engaged in the educational process. Some respondents participated in the learning activities as one participates in a game of chance. They viewed the grade twelve certificate as a jackpot that would significantly change their lives. They had gambled a great deal on the opportunity to learn, but they did not always know the strategies that would increase their chances of success. Similarly, obstacles faced tended to be tackled with random methods, rather than with deliberate strategies. Respondents viewed instructors as having the potential to control the outcome of the game and, ultimately, the learners' lives. Consequently, they felt less in control of their learning, and more fatalistic about the outcome.

Other respondents entered the game of education with the same goal as that of the upgrading program, to seek truth and knowledge. However, their definitions of truth and methods of inquiry were more subjective and personal than those usually associated with academic learning. They preferred the exploration of self-knowledge to the accumulation of abstract theories and facts. Moreover, they favored activities involving sensory experiences and personal interactions, and viewed activities comprising objective exploration as less relevant to their learning. As a consequence, they felt more in control of their personal growth than in their academic progress.

In addition, other participants approached academic learning similarly to the way one plays a game of strategy. For them, learning was a challenge. They began educational activities knowing certain methods and strategies were available to overcome obstacles that may have prevented them from obtaining their grade twelve certificates. Some of these strategies and methods were already known; the ones the respondents did not know, they were willing to learn. They had a sense of control over their learning and saw instructors as collaborators in the process.

The respondents' definitions of knowing and approaches to learning did not remain static, nor were they as clearly defined as the categories might suggest. Like their self-concepts, respondents' definitions and approaches changed as they gained self-confidence and self-esteem. However, the degree and direction of change differed from respondent to respondent, depending on individual circumstances and past experiences.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, REFLECTIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Summary

This study developed out of concerns stemming from both my professional and personal experiences. As an instructor in an academic upgrading program, I was interested in understanding the learning experiences of adult learners. As a woman who had returned to school after several years' absence, I was interested in comparing my experiences with those of other women who had reentered. From these two interests, an exploration of the experiences of women as participants in an academic upgrading program evolved. I was particularly concerned about how involvement in the program affected the women's self-esteem and self-concepts, how they reacted to the learning process, and how involvement in the program affected their relationships with others.

An understanding of the women's experiences from their own points of view, and the meanings they ascribed to these experiences, were sought. Thus, the research was conducted using the methodology and strategies of the qualitative paradigm; these best fitted the phenomena under study.

Six women participants were asked to describe their experiences as they proceeded through an academic upgrading program. Their descriptions were taped and later transcribed. During the interviews, I recorded in a journal my reflections on each interview. I analysed the data from both the transcripts and the journal.

The analysis involved three steps, each revealing a layer of understanding that deepened with each stage. The first step disclosed a literal comprehension as the events were grouped into five categories: past experiences, problems encountered, support received, joys of learning, and fear of the future. The second step sought a deeper understanding and consisted of placing into clusters the experiences with commonalities. Each cluster was ascribed a key phrase which attempted to reveal the essence of its experiences. Finally, exploration for the deepest meaning occurred in the third step, the search for themes or concepts that influenced and shaped each woman's entire experience. These themes included definitions of knowing, approaches to learning, and redefinition of self.

Reflections on the Women's Experiences

As I listened repeatedly to each woman tell of her experiences as a learner in the program, it struck me that what I was hearing was a short portion of her life story, a short story which comprised central idea, character, and plot. In literature an analysis of these elements helps to broaden and deepen the reader's awareness of the story. As

I reflected on the women's stories, using these structural aids, I too acquired a deeper and fuller understanding of their experiences and the meanings they ascribed to them.

The separate experiences related in the women's stories intertwined and connected, creating a web conveying one central idea. This idea was manifest in the struggle the respondents underwent while involved in the program. The respondents became conscicus of their need, desire, and right to be active participants in the social world, and this awareness prompted their enrollment in the program. Overall, this involvement was positive; the women reported on how they had grown personally and had gained more control over their lives. Yet, the extent to which they struggled against psychological, social, and economic forces to gain this personal growth is noteworthy. As they interacted with the social and learning environments, doubt, fear, frustration, anxiety, and guilt characterized respondents' attempts to return to school, to achieve their goals, and to change their lives. From this interaction a story of struggle, complete with conflict, suspense, climax, and denouement evolved.

Character

The respondents encountered certain experiences because of their individual characters. Thus, an understanding of their characteristics is important to any interpretation of their interactions with the social and learning environments. Five specific factors were significant to this interaction and consequent struggle: sense of dignity, determination to change, definition of knowing, approach to education, and redefinition of self.

What was most striking about the six women was the sense of their own dignity, despite their obvious lack of self-confidence and low self-esteem. Respondents felt like nobodies who knew little and were of little value. They liked neither who they were nor what they were doing with their lives. Nonetheless they possessed a regard for their own humanity, which, while slight, enabled them to desire changes, not just in their economic conditions, but in social status as well. They wanted to live more satisfying lives doing jobs that contributed valuably to society. They wanted desperately to be part of the "inside crowd," part of the dominant class.

This sense of dignity inspired determination to make changes in their lives, and enrollment in the program was the women's deliberate attempt to induce this change. However, many obstacles lay in the way, marking their reentry with intense personal struggle. When deciding to return to school, respondents wrestled with financial problems, personal priorities, immaturity, or particular life events. It is interesting to note that, in the main, the women struggled with these obstacles on their own.

Apart from the financial aid available from sponsoring agents, any support and encouragement the respondents did receive came predominantly from friends or family.

The way in which respondents defined knowledge and knowing also influenced the extent to which they struggled. The ambiguity inherent in the self-directed learning method confused and frustrated respondents who depended on "experts" for knowledge. They wanted more structure, direction, and clarity. When instructors did not help in the way the learners believed they needed, they viewed the instructors as withholding information. Frustration with independent learning led one respondent to criticize instructors harshly for "just [sitting] there waiting for you to come to them." She asserted, "There should be more classroom teaching." In contrast, the women who relied on experience and feelings to reveal truth had difficulty accepting academic knowledge that devalued or contradicted their experiential knowledge. One respondent, for example, felt that her experiences were not valued when an instructor showed her a better way, not the only correct way, to express her thoughts. She argued that to change her mode of expression would be "writing that instructor's way," not the way she viewed it. Finally, learners who did not differentiate between academic and experiential knowledge had the least difficulties. Their perceptions of knowledge and of knowing seemed congruent with those of the instructors and other personnel in educational institutions.

The respondents' approaches to learning were closely related to their definitions of knowledge and knowing and affected equally the way they interacted with the learning environment. A fatalistic approach compounded the struggle for respondents who listened to the voices of others. Not valuing their own opinions or decisions, they looked to authority for direction as well as information, willingly placing the control of their learning in the instructors' hands. Respondents became confused when the instructors' directions lacked the specificity and clarity the learners required. This led them to assess the instructors' evaluation methods as inconsistent, expectations as ambiguous and unrealistic, and attitudes as discouraging. Moreover, these respondents were more inclined to suspect cheating among their peers or favoritism on the part of the instructors. Likewise, incongruences between learners' goals and objectives and those of the program intensified the struggle for women who relied on the inner voice. A preference for personal knowledge was sometimes acquired at the expense of academic progress. For example, one learner gained self-knowledge and self-confidence through many activities not directly related to her academic program, causing her to feel like "a winner one day and a loser the next." She won at enhancing her personal growth, but lost at fulfilling her academic goals. At the same time, learners who approached their learning with specific strategies and skills struggled the least. They felt more in charge of their learning; thus, they were less fearful of competition and more willing to take risks.

Respondents entered the program with self-concepts already fully formed and defined by previous experiences. Their self-identities, however, were redefined and transformed as learners gained self-knowledge through their learning experiences. The women grew to see themselves as learners and valued adults who were less defensive and more accepting of others. While having obvious positive effects, this process of redefinition also added to the struggle as respondents adjusted to their new self-concepts. Linda's confidence, for example, had grown sufficiently to enable her to plan a future which included ambitions and goals, but her confidence had not grown sufficiently to eliminate the fear that she might do something foolish that "would throw [her] back" into her past circumstances. Similarly, through "self-learning," Sandra began to understand the reasons she had been "travelling down this rough and rocky road" and that "the pattern [could] be broken." As a consequence, she felt pressured to do something with this knowledge. Not surprisingly, she found it much easier to learn than to apply. The process of redefining induced greater self-confidence and self-esteem, but it also elicited internal strife as respondents struggled to stabilize their new selves in an already established social context.

Conflict

Many experiences contributing to the struggle stemmed from a variety of conflicts, originating from internal, human, or environmental sources. Regardless of their origin, these conflicts were deeply embedded in societal values and attitudes. As a consequence, tensions arose between the will of the respondents to bring about change and the societal determinants that frustrated this will.

Perhaps the conflict that had the most impact on respondents' attempts to achieve was the internal battle between their profound determination to succeed academically and their lack of confidence in the ability to learn. Doubt emanating from this lack of confidence never completely overpowered their determination; however, it was responsible for many experiences that intensified the struggle. For some respondents, doubt concerning their academic potential evoked a need to strive "for 100% all the time," placing undue strain on themselves and their families. Lack of confidence led other women to be skeptical of their own ambitions, threatened by and suspicious of their peers' intentions, defensive of other people's remarks, and intimidated by the instructors.

The confidence respondents had in their ability to learn depended directly on their self-perceptions. It is not surprising nor unusual that past school experiences which, in the main, were negative, affected these perceptions. What is more surprising is that they were equally shaped by experiences stemming from their adult roles. How competent and how valued they felt as employees, mothers, or contributing members of their communities influenced the extent to which they doubted their academic potential. For example, from the positions in society that Betty held, she became aware that "you never stop learning, whether you are in school or not." Furthermore, she attributed her success in the program to her "life experiences." She had confidence in her ability to handle her life, a confidence that reduced her anxiety about her learning potential. Thus, she was afraid only of "getting back into learning." On the other hand, there were those who felt less able as contributing members of society. The jobs they had performed were valued neither economically nor socially. The respondents recounted numerous examples of how their previous contributions received little appreciation or recognition. To illustrate, men on the work crew for whom Sandra cooked never complimented her on the meals she prepared. Nancy, as a housewife and mother, believed she belonged "in a different class," and another respondent who was on social assistance knew as a person in society she was "just someone that was there." In contrast to Betty, these respondents received little feedback that indicated they were competent in their adult roles. Consequently, confidence in their learning ability seemed commensurate with their feelings of incompetence.

Equally important, poor self-perceptions led some respondents to differentiate between experiential knowledge and academic knowledge. Anne and Helen saw themselves as "not knowing" because they did not have "book knowledge." They both recognized they had practical experience and knew "about life," but this was not, in their estimation, as valuable as the academic knowledge they lacked. In academic settings, they viewed themselves as persons who did not possess knowledge and, therefore, might be incapable of learning.

In addition, experiences arising from internal conflicts that existed between respondents' need to increase their self-esteem and their need to fulfill traditional female roles also influenced the extent they struggled. Respondents defined a "somebody" as a person who works at a respectable job. This definition indicates respondents understood that self-esteem is gained in our society through participation in the public sphere. Respondents who were mothers also understood that their place was in the home with their children. As a result, these mothers felt guilty and confused as they wrestled with this contradiction. Moreover, in keeping with cultural expectations, respondents had always cared for others before themselves. Since returning to school necessitated putting themselves and their goals first, they paid an emotional price for this change in priorities, even though it had positive effects. Although people gave them more respect because they respected themselves, respondents felt guilty placing themselves first. They assumed this choice had to be made at the expense of those for whom they always had cared.

Further to these internal conflicts, tensions between respondents and instructors materialized. These tensions emerged as a result of the authority and power intrinsic in the instructors' positions: instructors had more power than the respondents because of the instructors' higher educational qualifications. The feelings of frustration and anxiety evoked by the instructors' methods of evaluation, expectations, and attitudes seem to indicate the powerlessness some respondents felt. Yet they, perhaps unwittingly, accepted and resigned themselves to this unequal situation for two reasons: their own desire to obtain credentials, and their need to have their learning abilities verified. First, respondents were aware society granted the instructors authority because of their credentials; instructors were "at the top already" and knew "what they were doing" because "they had the degrees." However, the comment that the learners were "just struggling to get that" indicates respondents knew that the acquisition of credentials was one way of acquiring power, or at least more power than they had at present. Therefore, they could not be totally against an authority they aspired to exercise. Secondly, respondents were taking great risks to improve themselves, and they needed constant encouragement and verification from someone with credibility to ensure that they were capable of effecting change. Instructors had that credibility; therefore, respondents relied on instructors for encouragement and reinforcement. As a consequence of this imbalance of power, instructors had the potential to create or destroy, to encourage or belittle, to support or pressure.

Environment, in particular the learning environment, was another source of conflict. A difference in values between those of the "institution" and those of some of the respondents was one such conflict. Perhaps Anne, for example, was referring to a difference between her values and the "institution's" with her remark about being "out of her tree." Implicit in this comment is more than an indication of insanity; it may also imply she was away from her own milieu, a milieu that had attitudes, values, and behaviors different from those of the learning environment. Helen expressed the same concerns when she worried about her speech patterns and her style of dress. There are certain modes of dress, speech, and thought belonging to academic institutions; Helen sensed hers were different. These fears and concerns elicited anxiety in Anne and Helen as they feared their behaviors, values, and attitudes may not be accepted by instructors nor other learners.

A conflict in values also led some learners to believe that their knowledge and ways of understanding the world were devalued in educational settings. This conflict was made dramatically manifest for Linda. She viewed her experience with an instructor who expected her to speak and write as he did as an example of a situation in which only instructors' definitions of knowledge appeared acceptable. This conflict was exacerbated by the contradiction between being viewed on one hand as an adult and therefore capable of managing one's own learning and on the other as not having one's knowledge and experiences as an adult valued.

The learners also found their financial difficulties a source of conflict. Some respondents suffered inordinate stress and anxiety concerning their economic situations. All the respondents received financial assistance from government training programs; however, the assistance in most cases was inadequate to relieve the learners of economic stress. It is noteworthy that none of the respondents had been in employment situations which offered training allowances.

Lastly, a conflict between the promises of education and the realities of society was becoming apparent. Education, as touted by society and its institutions, is the pathway to a better life. Yet the reality of the situation, when these women graduate, may be that there will be no jobs or only jobs that are characterized by low pay, little security, and few promotions. It is interesting to note the women had all chosen traditional female occupational goals. Three planned on careers in the health services, one wanted to be a secretary, another hoped to train as a day-care worker, and the sixth planned to be an interior decorator. In the main, women's jobs tend to have lower pay, less security, and fewer promotions. Are these the best jobs for the respondents even though these jobs may enable the women to obtain more satisfying life styles than those they have at present?

Only one respondent mentioned the discrepancy between the promises of education and the realities of the job market. Sandra was aware that the opportunity to find job security depended on the economic climate. Perhaps the other respondents' failure to mention such concerns emerged from self-defensive impulses rather than from a lack of awareness; they had risked so much and believed so strongly in education as a catalyst for change that any doubts about its effectiveness was too painful to comtemplate.

Suspense

The various forms of support existent in the program frequently counteracted the effects arising from the internal, personal, and environmental conflicts. Nevertheless, this interplay of conflict and support contributed an element of suspense to the struggle. Respondents constantly wondered if their determination, the support system, and the benefits of their learning were sufficient to offset these conflicts. The tension induced by the suspense was aptly explained by one respondent when she equated her journey through the program to a trip across a tightrope through which her only support was her own outstretched arms and the encouragement of the crowd below.

Intensifying this suspense was the poignancy of the women's situations. Some of the women considered this their last chance to become a "somebody." If they failed at this program, they were destined to return to their pasts. Education was the only way they saw of "getting off welfare" and "making more than $5.00 an hour." When Anne said that "without book knowledge you are like the guy with a pick and shovel," she knew if she failed in this program she would be back "washing human stuff off the walls."

However, it should be noted that not all the respondents considered this their final chance. One respondent, for example, remarked, "I was going to change and returning to school was something that just fit in there to help me along." For her, school was one of many steps she was taking to bring about change in her life. But for others, school was the only agent of change they could envision. For these respondents, especially those who did not always feel in control of their learning or their lives, the suspense was most profound.

Climax

Respondents anticipate that the anxiety engendered by this suspense will be eliminated by one climactic event: graduation. The certificate received at graduation is concrete; it is a piece of paper that proves they will have accomplished their goals, they can "go on" to their next program, and they are, indeed, learners.

Some respondents hope the education they have gained in the program, and that will be validated by the certificate, will emphatically change their lives. Many of them believe schooling is one means of obtaining social mobility. Their belief rests on the hope that credentials will enable them to become members of the "inside crowd."

Denouement

In a short story, the denouement shows the effect of the climactic moment. If the story of the respondents' experiences had been a fairy tale, its denouement may well have been "and they lived happily ever after." However, it is not a fairy tale, but a portion of real life filled with complexities and uncertainties. The grade twelve certificate gives them the right to "go on," but not necessarily the confidence. Respondents looked to future programs with the same timidity they felt before entering this course. They continued to doubt their academic abilities, to fear rejection and failure, and to question the wisdom of their ambitions. This leaves one to infer that the learning process seems to be cyclical and, therefore, the struggle to be ongoing. Possibly the respondents who struggled so doggedly could find comfort in the following words:

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.
>
> T. S. Eliot
> "Little Gidding"

Reflections on the Relevant Literature

The experiences the six women in this study so candidly described were similar to my experiences as an adult learner. Moreover, this study's findings also reveal that the reasons women return to school and the economic, psychological, and social impact of education on women's lives are similar to the motives and impact uncovered in other related research. These similarities exist even though this related research and my experiences concern women involved mainly in higher education. Perhaps this indicates the experiences women encounter as learners are influenced more by female societal roles and gender-linked psychological factors than by level of education. Any noticeable difference between the respondents' experiences and those related in the research, or my own experience, was evident in degree rather than kind.

In general, research examining motivational factors reveals that women return to education desiring a change in their lives (Letchworth, 1970; McLaren, 1985; Mohney and Anderson, 1988; Sales, Shore & Bolitho, 1978; Scott, 1980). Many women enroll seeking personal fulfillment and self-improvement, while others return to acquire credentials in an effort to improve their economic status. However, some researchers (McLaren, 1985; Ross, 1988) suggest that, regardless of the reasons, women's decisions to continue their education are neither straightforward nor simple and are greatly influenced by their "social, political, and cultural environment" (McLaren, 1985, p. 89). Likewise, in this study, social context influenced significantly the women's decisions to return to school.

A desire to improve economic and occupational status is among the many reasons women enter colleges and universities. However, researchers find though education improves the status of the jobs women may obtain, it influences economic gains only slightly (Gaskell, 1981; O'Donnell, 1984). In comparison to men, the impact of education on women's earning power is minimal (Gaskell, 1983). In her report, Gaskell (1983) notes women "earn far less than men for every year of education they complete, and the ratio of male to female earnings has not improved over time" (p. 280). Moreover, feminized jobs are often the first to be affected by downward variances in the labour market perhaps because these jobs are usually low status and nonunion. McLaren (1985), for example, found in her study that as a result of the economic climate, many learners left college only to find they were unemployed or underemployed.

Researchers have discovered also that women who return to education experience many psychological problems (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Eliason, 1981; Papier, 1980; Suchinsky, 1984). The most significant of these problems is the women's lack of confidence in their ability to learn. Women lack academic confidence regardless of social background or previous education (Belenky et al., 1986). Furthermore, conflicts that arise between women's roles as mothers and wives and women's roles as students also elicit psychological stress (Mohney & Anderson, 1988; Patterson and Blank, 1985). These role conflicts may evoke feelings of guilt and selfishness. Women feel guilty for neglecting their responsibilities as mothers and wives, and selfish for spending money on education (Letchworth, 1970; Eliason, 1981; Patterson & Blank, 1985).

In addition, studies find that the impact of educational experiences may also create socially related difficulties (De Coito, 1984; Hirschoff, 1988; Wintersteen, 1982). Financial problems, lack of child care, lack of support from family and friends, and domestic problems are major reasons that women attend classes irregularly or withdraw suddenly (De Coito, 1984).

Despite these problems, there are definite benefits for women who struggle to return and achieve their academic goals. Most studies indicate that women's self-concepts and self-esteem are enhanced (Butterwick, 1988; Kirk, 1982; McLaren, 1985; McWilliams, 1982; Pillay, 1987). McLaren (1985), for example, states that going to college had "given [the women] more confidence, a greater understanding of the world and their position in it [illegible] had helped them to acquire a stronger sense of autonomy" (p.165).

However, what these studies do not emphasize is that personal growth, which occurs through a process of redefining of self, may induce stress and anxiety. The women I interviewed revealed that adjusting to their new selves was difficult and sometimes painful. Brundage and Mackeracher (1980) support this finding. They suggest:

> ...the process of change has the potential for changing meanings, values, skills, and strategies of past experience and the self-concept, thereby temporarily destabilizing both. This lack of stability may lead to loss of confidence and to possible withdrawal from the process of change. (p. 101)

Researchers have begun only recently to investigate how women define and acquire knowledge. As a consequence, the research regarding this issue is meager (Belenky et al., 1986; Gilligan, 1977; Luttrell, 1989). However, the findings of this research show that women develop a sense of themselves and their world through means that emphasize caring, connectedness, and compassion (Gilligan, 1977). Moreover, these researchers suggest women do not have a single way of viewing and understanding the world but operate out of many different perspectives, or "ways of knowing." These perspectives determine the way women describe themselves, their interactions with others, the control they have over their lives, and the manner in which they learn (Belenky et al., 1986). How women learn and understand is also affected by the social, cultural, and political realities of their social context; thus, class, race, as well as gender influence the way women define and claim knowledge (Luttrell, 1989).

The respondents of this study also used a variety of perspectives from which to view the world. The particular modes they employed reflect the way they view themselves as participants in society and the degree of control they have over their own lives. What this research uncovered that other research minimizes is that these modes of knowing seem to influence the extent women struggle as participants in formal educational settings. It became apparent from the women's learning experiences that those who relied on the expertise of others or on intuition and feelings to explain the world and their place in it had difficulty adjusting to the learning environment. Conversely, women who were able to construct their own knowledge from a variety of sources, both internal and external, experienced less difficulties.

Implications for Practice

The research I undertook revealed that the respondents were actively struggling to gain control over their lives by making changes in their personal circumstances. However, it also revealed that the psychological, social, and economic structures under which and within which the women live influenced the extent to which they struggled to gain control and bring about change.

The adult education program these women attend exists within these cultural and economic structures and may, therefore, exacerbate the struggle. However, the program does not need to. The understanding and insights gained from this research may enable the program's personnel to take several steps that might help women overcome the difficulties they encounter while attempting to change their lives.

1) The women must be helped to understand that they come to the educational setting already knowing something. Their lack of confidence in their abilities indicates some of them did not naturally see themselves as learners or as people who already possess useful and valued information. Instructors need to show the women they have a wealth of knowledge gained from their past experiences. This can be accomplished by using learners' past experiences in the learning situations, by beginning where learners are and not where the curriculum begins, and by using the learners' own problems as starting points for their learning. In addition, learners need to be shown first that their ideas expressed through speech and print are valued and acceptable. Their modes of communication can be challenged

and expanded once the ideas and opinions conveyed by these modes are acknowledged and recognized as valuable.

2) It must also be recognized that not all learners are capable of self-directed learning. In particular, those learners who rely on experts and authority to receive knowledge and directions may need an externally imposed structure, with expectations and evaluation procedures that are clear-cut and direct. The learners can be helped to make the shift from externally to internally imposed guidelines, once they gain confidence in their own voices and opinions. However, some learners may never have the ability or desire to be self-directed. Instructors need to recognize and consider these individual differences to facilitate learning best suited to each participant.

3) Learners' personal objectives need to be considered within curriculum objectives. Some of the women, particularly those who listen to their inner voice for truth, come to the learning situation with personal agenda. These agenda are sometimes in conflict with the academic goals. Instructors need to be sympathetic to these differences in goals and to help the learners incorporate their personal agenda into the learning activities. Moreover, instructors must be wary of overloading the curricula with additional activities they

deem as valuable to the learners' education if these activities are inconsistent with the learners' goals.

4) Instructors and other personnel working with adult learners must be aware of the authority and power inherent in their positions. To suggest there is no difference between instructors and adult learners is naive and unrealistic. However, the negative effect this difference evokes can be minimized, and the positive effect can be enhanced through increased awareness on the instructors' part. Instructors must be sensitive to the effect that their comments and attitudes have on learners, especially those learners who rely on an external voice to define and confirm their capabilities. The instructors' expertise should be used to help learners examine their needs and capabilities and to design activities and evaluation methods which facilitate learning within the learners' own framework, not the instructors'. Therefore, instructors might try to collaboratively design evaluation methods and course expectations, not arbitrarily impose them. Failing that, they should at least try to ensure that learners fully understand instructors' expectations and methods of evaluation.

5) Counselling, support, and guidance must be an integral part of the educational program for women. Appropriate

guidance and support could come from professional services, as well as women support groups. These support groups would provide women with an opportunity to profit from sharing their problems and concerns with their fellow learners. Regardless of the source of support, women need assistance as they struggle with the guilt, stress, and anxiety they experience as learners. Also, as women near the end of the program, counselling is needed to help them make the transition to the next step, whether it be further education or employment. Lastly, given that all the respondents chose traditional female careers with limited economic rewards, counselling is needed that would encourage women to consider nontraditional careers which provide greater financial benefits and wider employment opportunities.

Implications for Research

This study discloses ways in which its respondents defined and appropriated knowledge and, therefore, contributes to our understanding of how women make sense of the world. Even so, continued research is needed if administrators, counsellors, and educators are to understand and to be more sensitive to women's modes of thinking and learning.

The findings of this study imply that the extent to which the women struggled to achieve an education was influenced by their definitions of knowing and approaches to learning. Therefore, future research might examine how the learning environment affects these definitions and approaches. An investigation of curriculum content, instructor-learner relationships, and instructional and evaluation methods as they relate to women's various ways of knowing, might provide findings that would foster more effectively women's learning.

The respondents' past experiences also seemed to influence their modes of learning. Little is known about this relationship. Further research is needed that would explore the many variables involved. For example, how do the effects of class, race, and age shape the way women define and claim knowledge, and how do these factors shape the meanings women ascribe to learning and knowing?

In addition, the women's definitions of knowledge and approaches to learning did not remain static but appeared to shift and change as the women proceeded through the program. The reasons for this shift remain unanswered and unexplored. A longitudinal study would be helpful to determine what factors facilitate and foster a change to different modes of learning. Moreover, this study might examine whether learning perspectives are sequential and hierarchical (Belenky et al., 1986).

The respondents of this study were persistent and determined in spite of their struggles and difficulties.

Many other women, howver, are unable to sustain this persistence and, thus, drop out of the program. Research that explores the experiences of these women from their own points of view is also needed.

Finally, this present research describes only women's orientations to learning. Still, there is no evidence suggesting these orientations are unique to them (Belenky et al.,1986). Therefore, an examination of undereducated men's experiences might be useful also to enrich their education.

The Last Word

The implications discussed above are important in facilitating effectively women's learning, but they do not attempt to change the societal conflicts and contradictions women as learners experience. To eliminate these conflicts, a plan of action is required that is not addressed in these implications for practice.

Cultural and economic structures frustrate women's endeavors to return to school, to achieve their goals, and to change their lives, and adult educators are in a position to help alleviate these frustrations. Educators can attempt to change social structures that thwart women's efforts, by working collectively with the women to help them rethink their positions within society and to help them disclose the conflicts and contradictions within their lives.

In the midst of this research project, I returned to my position as instructor in the program. Though I do not work directly with the women I interviewed, I am able to see first hand the respondents and their female peers living out the experiences they so candidly related to me. I see them struggling daily as they attempt to achieve their goals and to change their lives. Throughout the research process, I continually consulted with the six interviewees and the instructors, asking for validation of my analysis, interpretations, and reflections of the data. If I agree my mission as an adult educator is to educate, not to train, then I must take the research process one step further. I must now take the findings back to the respondents and the other instructors so we can devise collectively a plan of action that would reveal and potentially change the cultural and economic structures that do not serve women's interests.

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APPENDIX I

SAMPLE OF LETTER SENT TO PARTICIPANTS

Dear

Further to our conversation regarding my thesis, this letter will describe the purpose of the research, plus explain the terms under which I will regard your participation.

The purpose of the project is to explore the experiences of women, such as yourself, who have returned to school. I am particularly interested in how involvement in the program has affected your self-esteem and self-concept, what impact involvement in the program has had on your relationship with others, and how you reacted to the learning process.

If you choose to participate as a respondent in this research project, all the information you give will remain confidential. Any quotations I use from your responses will not reveal your identity. Furthermore, the names of the institution or individuals you mention throughout your interview will not be repeated in the written report. Also please be aware that your participation is voluntary and that you may drop out of the research project at any time.

Once your taped interview has been transcribed, you will receive a copy of the transcript. At this time, you will be given an opportunity to change, delete, or add to the text. In order to ensure reliability of the findings, your validation of the transcribed interview is both welcomed and necessary.

I would like to thank you for giving me an opportunity to work with you. If you have any further questions or concerns regarding the research and your part in it, please do not hesitate to discuss them with me. Thank you again for your valuable time.

Yours truly,

Karen Teeling

APPENDIX II

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Background

Describe your life before involvement in the program: past school experiences, past work experiences.

What did you like about your life?

What did you want to change?

Motivation

What brought you to this program?

What were your expectations of the program?

What were your specific goals and objectives?

What changes did you hope would occur in your life because of involvement in the program?

Learning Experiences

Describe your reactions to: the arrangement of the classroom, availability of books, independent learning, group work, the modules, evaluation methods, the facilitation of the instructors, your peers.

What helped you learn the best?

What was your most valuable learning experience?

What was your most negative learning experience?

Who or what helped you the most in overcoming difficulties or obstacles that you encountered?

What would you change about the program?

Self-concept and Self-esteem

How would you describe yourself before you came into the program?

How would you describe yourself now?

To what do you attribute the changes?

How did you feel about yourself before you came into the program?

How do you feel about yourself now?

To what do you attribute the difference?

Relationships

Describe how involvement in the program has affected your relationship with: your spouse, partner, family, friends.

How do you feel about the changes in these relationships?

What affect have these changes had on your learning?

Practical Problems

What are some of the practical problems you have had to deal with as a learner?

Who or what helped you deal with these difficulties?

General

From your experiences in the program, what would you tell other women thinking of entering the program?

What advice would you give these women?

APPENDIX III

SAMPLES OF DATA

Excerpt of a Transcript

K: So how long have you been on your own?

L: Ten years. Ten years this February. We are going celebrate. (Laugh) My kids and I.

K: Your life is much happier since you separated from your husband?

L: Oh yes! (big sigh of relief) I never really cared to get married until now. Now I wouldn't really mind. Before I even hated men. Now I can see they are not that bad, if you get the right kind. I was just always looking for the wrong kind. The kind I want is very far and few between. That fits into my life. I would marry if I found the right kind. Until then I am happy the way I am. I don't care about dating. My life isn't all wound up with breakups. "He's hurting me; he's always drinking." That kind of thing.

K: You feel you have your own identity?

L: Yes. I never felt I had my own identity before, never. It is really weird. When I first left Sam, my mom domineered me. I've always been domineered, ever since I was a little girl. When Sam left, I let it bounce back to Mom. She was the dominate one. Then she died, so I got my grandmother to move in with me. But my grandmother was not the domineering kind, and she went and moved in with my brother. Then she died, and I was lost. I didn't know what to do. I went nuts. I did things I wouldn't do normally. Then I gradually started finding myself, and not having to live to other people's - that's what I like best about coming here - I don't have to live to other people's standards of me. I can live to my own. Like they might not like what I am, who I am, but I do. And that is what counts. I used to worry if they didn't like this about me, then they don't like me. But I found out that's O.K. Maybe they don't like this about me, but they like other things about me, so we just drop what they don't like about me.

K: What made you decide to come to this program at this point in your life?

L: I always liked working in the hospital; I always thought I was going to go back and be a nurse's aide. In B.C., when I looked into it, they told me I was going to need more education. But nobody told me how I could get into it. I was on welfare and part-time work. There was no way I was going to be able to do it with my five kids. Nobody gave me any idea that the government would help you. So I just dropped it. Then I moved here to be with my brother and my dad. I guess I felt I needed a home, a base again. When I moved here, I had a hard time getting on welfare. I moved here not because of welfare, but because of a job. But the job was only $3.50 an hour. There was no way I could live off of that, so I went to welfare to ask them to supplement me, and they didn't want to do that. My brother fought to get me on. When I was in there crying, I told them that I was willing to retrain and learn something. Then they told me about this program.

K: Please tell me what you life was like at that time?

L: It was going nowhere. I didn't have any kind of a future. My life is really tied up in my kids and that is why because I didn't have any place else to go. That is a lost feeling, boy. When you think that the most you can earn is $5.00 an hour.

K: When you realized you could come to a program like this, what were your expectations? How did you see the program helping you?

L: When I first came here, it was just to get my grade 12. I never had anything more than that. But just with my grade 12, I could see that I would be able to get a job in a motel, behind the desk, with just my grade 12. They couldn't say, "Well, you don't have you grade 12." I knew then that my kids, well they always claimed they were proud of me anyway, but I could see my kids being proud of me. I could see my family being proud of me. My brother is no dope, and here he would have one sister that is coming up.

Excerpt from Journal Notes
September 12, 1989

X was quite nervous, especially at the beginning. Even though she claimed that she was not cold, she had goosebumps on her arms. She was very concerned about giving useful information. I think, I hope, by the end, I convinced her that there were no right or wrong answers.

Nevertheless, throughout the interview, I never felt X was completely relaxed. Did she see me as authority, or was her nervousness a result of the type of questions I asked? I think some of the questions made her feel uncomfortable. More than [another respondent], X seemed bothered by questions asking her to describe or explain her feelings. As a consequence, I was hesitant to ask additional questions, though I do not recall feeling the need to probe any deeper. I need to keep this in mind during the other interviews. I may need to find other ways to ask questions that probe for feelings.

In spite of these feelings of insecurity about her performance, X came across as very mature and responsible, imparting a strong sense of self. She was more willing than [another respondent] to accept others and their ideas. She was even willing to view negative experiences as valuable learning experiences. There was no hint of blaming others for her shortcomings. X saw herself as a changed person. Going back to school was part of a bigger plan and she is very proud of her accomplishments.

Feelings of frustration with some instructors was also evident in X's responses. Is this frustration stemming from feelings of powerlessness? Does X feel powerless only in the area of evaluation? That is possible, since she explained how she has become more assertive with those to whom she previously felt inferior (eg. salesman, etc.). Frustration with authority (Is that what it is?) may be a trend. I need to explore this area.